

The Mirratord Mole

by La Aardvark

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Summary: The first of a twofilm story, a mole has infiltrated the mighty Mirratord, and here is the screenplay based on actual events surrounding his location and capture. Screenplay is written by a member.

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**The Mirratord Mole **_By AE. _

Scene One

D1NGO walked across the pavilion without bothering to look at the various elements of dÂ©cor there. The stones under his armor-clad steps echoed with a kind of resonant melancholy, as it had been centuries since this place had seen a bright day. Today seemed to hold representation of more of the same. Nothing was overtly wrong, but something had been gnawing at the collective nerves of the Mirratord for a long while.

No one was quite sure what it was or what it meant as yet. But fresh back from a mission detail, D1NGO only wanted to pose his report and be done with it. He, like much of the Strike Team, preferred to be in the field, as there it was a known enemy, and not something cloaked and masked from them all. Pausing at the far doorway, he turned back, to investigate the source of the sound of a double-echo of what should only have been his own footsteps.

There, approaching from another angle, was a fellow operative, and member of the Strike Team. Aardvark had proven she was by far more formidable than many males, but it wasn't often that side showed. That she was here meant only that she was finished with her own extracurricular duties. Like D1NGO she wore her armor, but unlike him, over it she held an overcoat, a sleeveless garment that went all the way to the cobbled ground. It was the same color as her armor, just the way she liked it, but it was made of a material that gave the same effect as a sheet of oil.

"D1NGO." Aardvark greeted, nodding to him as she drew nearer.

D1NGO had been with the Mirratord for longer than Aardvark, but unlike her he had simmered at the bottom rungs of the rank ladder for a great deal of time, choosing with great consideration. She had made herself known among the hierarchs, and had gained a position on the Strike Team through collaboration with the top echelons. Though he had a mate, she had always seemed somehow attached to the Imperial Admiral, Aozora, treating him as though he were either her brother or her father, depending on her mood. D1NGO cocked his head. "You are back early."

"Be that I am." Aardvark answered, simply. She could be cryptic, sometimes, but being a Bard long before being a member of the Mirratord, her descriptive abilities were unsurpassed. There was only one other who came close, a hierarch called Soulguard. He too seemed taken by the aspiring officer, and they too had brought much in common to the fore for the rest to see. There was a literary archive, where Aardvark spent most of her time while at base, and sometimes Soulguard could be found there with her.

She was, however, at best, spoken for, and adamantly rigid in her faith for that mystery male. Whoever he was was yet to be revealed, although there was speculation that he might be a Mirratord leader. She never spoke of him unless his position was challenged when another male sought her company too closely, but she never named names, and no one knew who he was to ask.

She had recently brought her younger sister into the fold, recruiting Mask of Acalade as not only a fellow Bard but a female worthy of contending as well. Acalade had her own ways of getting by, though Aardvark could be so much more forward when she was irritated. It was rare that the rest of the Strike Team heard of her irk, however.

D1NGO let her pass him, going through the archway he was under and deeper into the fortress where the Mirratord had built their Mausoleum. Members from across the ages could be found there, the ones they had been able to retrieve stored in stasis pods, the ones lost to time carved in relief, earning their recognition by those that had known them while they lived. It wasn't a secret that being a member was dangerous, often fatal, but it was a secret that the Mirratord existed. They were the Right Hand of the High Council, something the Prophets of the Covenant were "under no uncertain terms" not to know about.

He watched as she disappeared through the intermittent shade and light-fall between columns, each pillar of piled and stacked bricks casting its own inky shadow. Shaking his head, aware like most that he would never be able to fully understand the female, D1NGO made his way after her, not so much following Aardvark than following the same route she had to arrive at the same destination. He could worry about menial tasks such as questioning her strange astute mood later.

That was if Lai Tasha didn't ask first.

The Councilor was nothing if not thorough, although at times he would be distracted enough to miss some things. Lai didn't often overlook items such as the mental health of his Strike Team, however, as

anything wrong there could lead to utter disaster elsewhere.

Sunlight dotted the hall as he trod, the brief blinks of light and dark serving to distract D1NGO's thoughts. Maybe it was the interrogation he'd been through the previous week. It wasn't common practice, but scent of a mole had caused the various members in important places to be examined anew, even the ones that had been there for a long time. D1NGO was no exception. He knew Aardvark had undergone scrutiny before even himself, as she was newer and more likely to lose composure under pressure than he, as she was equally new to the practices and protocols of the Mirratord.

He wasn't there, but he'd heard she'd put up a significant fight when it was overwith, when the Elite holding the knockout medicine came forward. Everyone now knew how against drugs she was- even more evident was why. Aardvark had no memory of the event, stripped of it through chemical burnout due to a side effect of the sedative used. It was the only one she was susceptible to, which was likely why it was used, but on occasion she could be found muttering to herself, trying to piece together a fragmented moment in her past.

The drug was used in favor of the method used for D1NGO, he knew, because she was so small. Being a petite female made it hard not to cause permanent damages when simply smacking to render unconscious. He'd know- that bruise had lasted for three days.

High Councilor Lai Tasha sat bent over a desk, examining the holographic readouts hovering above it. Artificial light helped to keep the images from being distorted, but this still happened when someone walked by behind them. His gaze was drawn up when he watched one of what he was sure was still four operatives from the field go past. He wondered briefly what had been seen, if it was accomplished or if it needed a second try, more muscle or more brain to accomplish; but he looked back at his screens, well aware of the protocol. Each one would report to the Strike Team Leader- the Imperial Admiral- first. He let himself watch out of the corner of his eye as the operative walked out of sight, aiming for another chamber and looking for said individual.

Another passed through, gaining the same scrutiny, but Lai knew them both and knew from experience to let them do their jobs their way- things had a reputation for going monumentally smoother when he did, after all.

Aardvark passed under another archway, observing the dimmed light and considering the implications. Either there had not been anyone in this room for several hours, or someone was observing something that had proven to own a light-sensitivity. Sensing someone within, though, she moved forward. It was impossible to get past her, though if one was as practiced in her art one might manage. Striding past rows of data nodes stored in micro encrypted crystals, she ascended a shallow rampart to a secondary level in the Archive Quarter. A suave smile touched her features when she spied the one she sought there, off to one side of the raised dias with his attention buried in an archive file. He was either making updates, an addition, or researching.

But despite his distraction, he still detected her soft footfalls, and raised his head to look directly at her as she came to a stop

seven paces from his position. Seeing she had been noticed, Aardvark flexed in a bodily nod, her palms pressed together, in her version of a respectful bow. Her eyes never left his, though, ever attentive. After she had straightened, she folded her hands together in front of her, the back of one resting lightly in the cusp of the other.

"Imperial Admiral." She said, her tone level and her face expressionless.

Aozora knew better than to take this as nonchalance. He turned from what he had been doing to face her fully. "Something is bothering you, Lady Aardvark."

Aardvark's head turned slightly to one side. "You respect me as though I wore your position, and you mine."

Aozora nodded, cordially. "What did you find?"

"Nothing of consequence, and therefore nothing good, sir." Aardvark answered.

Aozora pondered that before answering. "I don't follow your logic."

"I went on that mission to scout a situation, Admiral, and I found nothing of the kind. Someone anticipated my arrival, and hid everything from me. I would have risked my cover to dig for it, sir-as a result I was forced to return here empty handed. You know as well as I that that is the one thing I despise most. No one gets by me what tries it again."

Aozora nodded. He'd been wary of letting his own guard down around this one since the beginning. Not that she couldn't be trusted- it was just that her sense of honor was alien to him, and it was hard to keep in her good graces. While being out of them would not harm her respect for him, it might become unhealthy if something else were to try their group's self-trust. Now she was irritated, and had taken the problem to him, not expecting him to solve it for her, but seeking counsel. Aardvark's sole admitted love was that she needed to be surrounded by those she could trust to give her the information she needed to get her job done, and done right. Here, she had come across a situation where she was missing some information, but to Aozora all it did was solidify the whisper that there was a mole in his fold. "I do."

Still, Aardvark was an interesting collage of moods when it came to things of this nature. Some irritations made her so raving mad not even their best would get near her. Others, which some of the other members saw as infuriating, would only garner a calm, albeit frustrated, sigh from her. In this case she appeared to be wearing optimism on her sleeve. "How is your mate?"

The Imperial Admiral smirked, amused at the sudden switch of topics. "She is fine."

"That is refreshing to hear." She clicked her mandibles. "What are you looking for?"

"I am not looking for something, Aardvark, I am updating the active files."

"I see, sir." She lowered her gaze slightly, to look at the floor past his hip. "I passed D1NGO on my way inâ€¢ when did he leave?"

"The day after you did." Aozora answered. "He was sent similarly on a reconnaissance mission. His was more fruitful, I hope."

"We hope, Admiral. Somehow someone must root this mole from our ranks, and the sooner the better." Aardvark said. She breathed a sigh. "It is hard, sometimesâ€¢ to understand how one such as that was even able to get inside."

"Or become a member. I fear to think it might be someone who has been here for a long time."

Aardvark looked at him with hard eyes. They could express the world, or merely reflect the picture of the one looking into them. For now she had blocked him out, but he could guess why. "No one who has been here long enough to be a recognized and renowned member could have broken under anything so menial as the mere torture tactics of the Prophets." She shook her head, staring at the floor again, looking speculative.

Aozora flinched at her tone. Aardvark could be the most loving individual sometimes, but sometimesâ€¢ "Beautiful Aardvarkâ€¢ do not dwell on it so much. If there is truly a mole, they will hear you coming. Let your mind rest, and the truth will reveal itself." He stepped across the gap between them, and lifted her gaze with a finger. "Hold faith."

"Ever has that been a truth of the universe." Her expression pinched momentarily. "Yet at times it does not reveal what is hidden until it is by far too late to act." She took his hand, and lowered it. "We must find this informant now, Admiral. Too much has already passed our eyes unseen. We are blind. Something is happening, and the Prophets don't want anyone, not even those who do not exist, to know."

Aozora nodded. "Go with my blessing, then. Tell no one. Not even those you call brothers inside the Mirratord. Anyone and everyone is suspect." He took a step back. "Even me."

Aardvark shook her head, silent, her expression now sad.

"Aardvark, if you are not thoroughâ€¢"

"I know you better than that, sirâ€¢" Aardvark said, the denial on her face showing as pain in her brilliant midnight sapphire eyes. "You love this place. These peopleâ€¢ what we stand for. Youâ€¢ you would die before serving the interests of another."

"Would I?" Aozora tested.

"I must trust someone, Admiral." Aardvark said, her complexion clearing. There was no sign of emotion on her fair face. "I chose you."

"I understand." He cast a glance past her as D1NGO walked up. "I trust you know where to begin."

"Sir." D1NGO greeted, saluting.

"Yes, sir." Aardvark lifted her hands, palming them together, before making her odd signature bow. That done, she turned, and sparing D1NGO a short, curt nod, left the dias and the Archive Quarter.

Both warriors watched as she left, before Aozora looked at D1NGO, silent. Without any words of his own, D1NGO just shook his head. Aozora turned back to the hologram, scowling. If anything, Aardvark was right about one thing. They were walking blind because of this mole. No one could find out anything because everything they chose to investigate was carefully considered before being executed- and even as much as that was necessary, it was undermining their operational capabilities. He slammed his fists into the desktop, but afterwards, just hung his head. Something had to be doneâ€¦ but it had to be quiet. It all had to be quiet.

Scene Two

The chambers were open and airy, the scent of vegetation flowing through the air vents in the corner from outside, where jungle growth swarmed over everything. The only reason there were no roots prying into the place was because of a security feature; the positron force field surrounding the entire structure.

Evilkitty pulled into her armor, wrinkling her face at the smell of polish and lube it gave off, ruining the pleasant smell coming through the vent. Dressed, she left the room, leaving her personal chambers to lie fallow likely for several days. She had been recently recruited, and had just come upon a new form of combat she hadn't seen before. As a result she would be staying with the trainer for as long as it took for her to perform the motions in her sleep. The arena was more than just- of late she had actually caught a member of the Strike Team in there, the cavernous chamber seeming to suit the other female's tastes when she wanted to sing.

Evilkitty thought the place would be empty now, though, because last she had heard was that certain members had gone out to perform recon, and wouldn't be back for another week or so. She had time. On her way down through the underground sector- something of a shortcut she had discovered- she passed a small number of other Mirratord members, most of them Minors, a few Majors, one or two Ultras like herself. She wasn't as enthusiastic about the Mirratord and its function as some were, but she saw it as a necessary element in a war that would never end, and so had aligned herself appropriately.

Acetylcholine paused to watch her go by, waving once when she noticed and cast him a glance. She waved back, but didn't slow. Her training was imperative, they said, and so she tried to be on time and attendant to her own bracket of duties. She just felt lucky she didn't have to clean up after making a mess of the place. She'd watched a couple of the times two of the elder members had dueled with their signature swords. There was no doubt in her mind she was nowhere near that good. Sometimes they got to moving so fast, their searing white blades made trails in the air that stayed there for several seconds.

Someday she would be gifted with her own pair, one for each hand, and be then taught to use them. The notion was certainly alluring. But even still, thinking logically about it all would make one shudder.

One wrong move, one accidental flick of one's wrist in the wrong direction, and one could lay not only oneself but anyone else wide open with the edges on those blades.

Being a filament wide made them sharper than the best metal edge, and being made of electron-fields, often flickering with static ripples, meant they would never break and could never be ruined by corrosion or rust. Also, they couldn't be detected by an untrained eye when deactivated, as the hilts didn't look quite the same as the Covenant Standard Issue energy sword. Those had two blades, one come from each end of the hilt, and the majority of the blade was held out to one's fore.

The Mirratord sword was held like a nightstick, with the majority of a relatively short blade held along the length of one's forearm.

Evilkitty had seen them in action, had marveled at their wielder's prowess. But today she was only going to be doing hand-to-hand, nothing involving any weapon other than her own limbs. It seemed rudimentary enough- after all, there were only so many ways one could throw one's weight, and only so many ways one could use one's arms and legs to hurt someone else.

Surfacing again in the Gathering Downs, a sector so named for all the enormous chambers it contained, Evilkitty made her way down a connection corridor to the Arena. It might as well have been an amphitheater or an auditorium, save that it had a large domed roof, causing the place to hold an echo for as long as one could bear to hear the same sound again and again. Arriving outside the doors, Evilkitty paused to listen.

Sure enough, someone was inside, and she could guess who. Another voice added to the serenade, though, giving Evilkitty pause. After wracking her brains for the name, she remembered Acalade was often there when her sister broke into song, for the express reason of singing with her. It sounded like another event- a ballad- being composed. Something about a specific person, and the enormous impact they had had, perhaps on an entire culture or race. Evilkitty sighed, and pushed the doors apart to permit herself passage. The sisters wouldn't care if she was there, and likely she'd spend the first half of her training listening to them sing. If she was lucky, it wouldn't repeat or go over the same material too many times. The place was big enough there would be plenty of room for them both to stand there and belt out whatever they wanted while Evilkitty had the crap beaten out of her.

She had nothing against them- but Evilkitty didn't much care for song or music at all, and would rather sit in a calm, perfect silence. One couldn't find good worthwhile peace what with someone else filling the space up with nonsense noises. It had nothing to do with Evilkitty, and likely never would, and she likely would never come around to the idea of making one's life around the art of song.

At least, she figured, they could sing. One was more soprano than the other, but they both could go really high. It was impressive. Somehow Aardvark had found that note somewhere between a whistle and a scream, and had made it a part of her vocals. When they went deep, though, it was interesting. Still, the way the Mirratord Ultra was singing her piece made Evilkitty pause. Acalade seemed to share

whatever sentiment it was, but the normal casual beauty of their voices had calloused for the lack of heart for the song. The fact that it was echoing back again and again made Evilkitty wonder if they weren't trying to drown out or beat down something that couldn't be changed. In silent contemplation, she watched as her tutor for the day arrived, still listening to the Sage-Bard's and Assassin-Bard's voices resonate around her.

Scene Three

D1NGO, Soulguard, Lai and Aozora all stood around the epicenter of the circular dias, none speaking. Sky could be seen through the circular hole in the low ceiling, but the chamber was only big enough to hold all of forty people comfortably, without seating. Warbirds trotted up, arriving late for the fact he had only just come back to the planet. Stopping, he looked around at the assembly of faces.

"Admiralâ€| Councilors." He paused. "We aren't all here?"

"No, not this time." D1NGO answered. "How went your mission?"

"Uh, what mission? I was free riding at the Mirratord's expense. There's nothing going on. What's to see?" Warbirds shrugged expansively. "It's like the whole universe has collectively decided to behave all of a sudden."

"Strangeâ€|" Soul muttered.

"I know! It's beyond weird. You'd think there would be at least _one_ troublemaker out today, but noâ€| nothing at all. It's frightening, to think what this means." Warbirds spent a moment rubbing a shoulder. "I almost blew it."

This comment got more acute attention. "What do you mean?" Lai asked.

"I mean, I decided to see what the hell was going on, and I nearly got captured and torn to shreds by a squadron of Honor Guards."

"What were you doing?" Soul asked.

"I told you- trying to see what the hell was going on. No one wanted to talk, my contact is as existent as we are right now and I found as many traces saying otherwise." Warbirds said. "What about you, D1NGO, see anything?"

"Nothing." D1NGO answered. "Nothing at all. I ran into the same quandary."

Warbirds gave him a speculative look. "So the whispers are true, then? We've got a leak?"

"Possibly more than that. Some of our members haven't come back and haven't sent word either." Lai said. "It's as if they truly and honestly, literally, do not exist. We were wondering if they had been caught and killed, but I did some investigating of my own, and found that at least one of them has been captured alive."

"Uh oh." Warbirds could think to say. "What do we do?"

"We go in, and stop any interrogation. If we can, we leave no traces of ourselves and leave with our operative. If we can't, you know the drill."

Warbirds looked at the Admiral, who had been thus far silent. "Sir? You haven't said a word."

"I've considered going to take care of it myself, but if I leave and something happens here, I don't know who to trust anymore, Warbirds." Aozora responded. "Our own have turned on us."

Warbirds bowed his head, conceding the point. "And we don't even know why."

Heads turned at a sound, pinning Tejan55 like a deer in headlights. He stepped back from the doorway, startled. "Uh, hi."

"Out." Soulguard ordered. "And make sure no one else comes this way."

"Yes sir." He turned, sheepishly, and left again. "Brass! yeesh."

Warbirds looked first at Soul, then at the rest of them. "Do we have anything to point at any one person? Or are we looking at more than one?"

"We don't know how many. Yet. The investigation is pending!" Lai mentioned, stroking his mandibles in thought.

"I have someone on it." Aozora spoke up.

Looks moved to the Admiral. "Who?" Soulguard asked.

"I cannot in good conscience tell you, lest it jeopardize his mission." Aozora said. He hated to lie and say 'him', but there were only three female members and that would make it all too easy for the real mole to either stop them all dead or track them all. Of males, though, at a total of 202 members, the Mirratord couldn't be kept complete track of, even by those running it. Also, by calling 'him' instead of 'her', Aozora had just sealed all three of the girls from scrutiny.

Nods of agreement followed this statement. "Agreed-." Soul amended. "Forgive my hasty query. I didn't think of what your answer might endanger."

"Indeed it is hard to think of the Mirratord as a breach in security, when it has ever been a nonexistent thread of thought that couldn't be infringed." Lai added, resting a hand on his fellow Council member's shoulder. "Your blunder could have been made by anyone- even myself, though my tongue was not so quick to convey the thought to speech." Looking at the rest of them, he added, "We are fortunate that we have such a sharp commanding echelon in charge of the Mirratord at this time. We could ask no better of you, Aozora."

Aozora bowed his head, humbled by the accolades arisen from a

Councilor's mistake.

Lai lifted a hand, in dismissal of the meeting. "For the honor of the Mirratord."

Everyone else raised their own hands in responding salute, and chorused back, "For the honor of the Mirratord." With these words, the gathering dispersed, each going their own way and trying to think of ways to subvert the spy that no one could seem to find.

Scene Four

Mask of Acalade walked elbow to elbow with Aardvark down a garden passage, heading for the quiet sectors of the ancient city ruin where the Mirratord had settled its headquarters. There were a million other places to run to if this one was found, and the signs of occupation were kept scant in case it had to be left behind in an emergency evacuation.

"What do you see, Acalade?" Aardvark asked. "I don't know where to start. I thought I did, but each time I think I might have found my quarry it turns out to be yet one more scape goat for the actual person I seek."

Acalade shook her head. "My sight is clouded by the events playing out in the greater picturesâ€| it will take too long for me to find focus. By the time I could tell you anything of value, it would be too late in that either he has already been caught or is long gone and the Mirratord since fallen to dust."

Aardvark sighed. "You don't need toâ€| wait."

"I don't need to wait for what?"

"No, I meant you don't need to set aside time for something that isn't worth it, but then the thought was sidetracked." Aardvark answered. "I need information I can use now. I need a path I can follow that will either lead me to him or at least lead me to a path that does lead to him."

Acalade rested her eyes on a hand as she walked. "Well, considering he was involved in the capture and detainment of Wildfire, you could help me find him by tracing from wherever they've got Wildfire."

Aardvark gave her sister a querulous look. "Wildfire's been captured?"

"Yes, he-." Acalade began, but didn't get to finish.

"Which one of your ethereal contacts told you that?" Aardvark interrupted. "I was in contact with Wildfire just two days ago."

"And he's been caught, Aardvark, try to bear with me."

"I wasn't informed by the Admiralâ€|"

Acalade shook her head. "Aardvark, dear sisterâ€| you must understand the way the minds of these males work. He didn't tell you because at

the time he didn't know- else he might not have allowed you to assume this new task but rather sent you to retrieve Wildfire and or kill him to maintain the secrecy that is as we speak being undermined."

"Can Wildfire be saved?" Aardvark asked.

Acalade lost sight of the true answer, at that point, aware that if she said no then she would be sending her sister to end a life where circumstances might change. If she said yes, then likewise she knew Aardvark would get everyone killed, including herself, trying to get Wildfire out alive simply because she believed she could. It was a difficult question to answer, regardless which was right and which was wrong. So she answered the only way she knew how. "That is up to you."

Aardvark wasn't cruel nor was she cold, but she had a habit of performing necessary evils she saw as unavoidable. If something needed to be done regardless of consequences, she was liable to get that job done before anything else could change. But Wildfire was worlds away, and it would take even swift and efficient Aardvark several days just to get to him, and that was if she knew right where to go. "I see." She understood that answer, though, as she had heard it many times before.

"I'm not sure where he is." Acalade added, going from memory since her second sight had been so callously dropped in her sudden fear of what her sister might do. "But I have a feeling they're not going to be nice to him while he's in captivity."

"I could have told you that. These rocks could have told you that." Aardvark spat, irate. "I may not have the sight you do, but I can still sense things more acutely than some others."

"Aardvark, if you go in guns blazing, you won't come out again." Acalade said, sternly. "And don't correct me, because you know what I mean."

"Damn. And I was really working up to that 'I don't use guns, I use knives' line." Aardvark sighed. "Alright, tell me what you do know. Be in-depth enough to be useful, but stay vague enough to leave room for surprises."

Acalade tried to concentrate on her innate ability again, but it seemed a fuzzy thing indeed even when she finally did re-grasp it. "Ohâ€| theâ€| somewhere outside theâ€| fifteenth sector, a place calledâ€| uhâ€| I think it either has an alphanumerical designation or it isn't named, but it has a nickname."

"He went there or they moved him there?" Aardvark asked.

"Oh, you know they took him there- tracelessly, too. They don't want to be disturbed." Acalade answered. "He probably went somewhere more populated, more known, you get better intel that way."

Aardvark gave a mirthless smile. "Yesâ€| alphanumerical designationâ€| where is this in neighbor to?"

"I don't know, it all seems so strange. Like it's been kept off the map. I think I could point it out, butâ€|" Acalade shook her head.

"Sorry, Aardvark. But you best hurry, because I think he's either about to break or they're about to kill him, because all I'm getting is bad event, all over the place." She looked at her sister. "Do be careful, you know I worry when you go out like this."

"You'll worry more just knowing what I'm up to isn't a sneak-in, look, sneak-out job. I'm liable to have to kill some creatures, maybe even some Sangheili, just to get in. Getting out, I'm thinking, might prove interesting indeed, if I have to drag a beaten operative out with me."

"Take someone with you." Acalade advised. "But when you arrive, go in separately."

Aardvark nodded. "I'll leave right away."

"Aren't you going to tell the Admiral?"

"He told me not to trust him, because he thinks it's dangerous. I don't know, I kind of doubt he's been rewritten mentally, but all things consideredâ€¦ well, I'll let you do the math, you're better at it." Aardvark stopped walking. "I want to, but something tells me I best not- or they'll see me coming an astronomical unit away, and be waiting."

"You're probably right." Acalade answered. "Sometimes all this cloak and dagger stuff really gets old- especially when it has to happen inside where we're supposed to be able to relax that faÃ§ade!"

Aardvark patted her sister's arm. "There, now, sister. Better to be here, than swimming in the lies of the Prophets and their Covenant." She turned, then, to procure her aid for the mission before leaving. Getting out quietly wouldn't be hard. Getting someone to come along quietly might be.

Acalade watched her sister leaving, her inky-black silk over robe swaying with her steps even as the black armor she wore under it pressed it into odd shapes where it touched her. "In conquest was it forged, and in conquest shall it fall." She whispered. "This Covenant cannot last."

Scene Five

Noble Hunter was unaccustomed to being drafted for a job the Imperial Admiral himself didn't know anything about, but after the brief explanation he'd been afforded he decided he did feel comfortable enough in attending the mission. Aardvark was just proving how volatile and strange she was again, at the same time performing a deed that could only show on her after the fact.

She was a piece of work, he knew, but she was easy to back up. If things got hairy, she'd not leave until she knew he could leave with her. She and her sister both were strange, even to those they were better acquainted with, and Noble didn't expect any striking revelations to happen along this trip. Get in, she said, get Wildfire, get out. Simple- that was plan A. If plan A proved unworkable, then plan B was get in, see what they'd done to Wildfire, erase the place, and then get out. If plan B flopped, then she would see about blowing the entire installation to hell and riding the

blastwave out as they left.

And just in case plans A through C all failed, he was happy to note, Aardvark would then revert to her usual- no plan. They would wing it, going in and coming out, with really only one idea in mind. Surviving it. Aardvark hated planning things out ahead of time unless it wasn't life threatening, and even then she usually let someone else bother with the planning. According to her logic, all the best laid plans often went awry, and then so did all the rest of the alphabet. Which was why their contingency plan was written around the fact that they didn't have one. It was find the nearest likely path, and go that way until circumstances changed. Noble had to admit- he liked it. It left room for spontaneity, something he enjoyed.

Although, he reasoned, he didn't usually have time for away missions, being often in charge of in-base affairs. Noble had done his share of them, a few minor things here and there to clear things up, but he wasn't about to go and make a habit of the practice.

He might wind up like Wildfire, after all. Poor guy. As their ship lifted through the atmosphere, he wondered briefly if the fact that the Admiral didn't know they were doing what they were doing meant he might send reinforcements. On one hand it sounded good. They might need reinforcements, on the off chance things got that sticky. On the other, they might arrive in time to all be killed in that blast wave Aardvark had mentioned. That, he supposed, would be bad.

Especially if it was someone importantâ€¦ like the Admiral himself. They would be six days in transit, flying on a combination of gut feelings, the words of a Sage, and the only planet on the map that still only had an alphanumerical designation. It was nicknamed appropriately, Noble mused, as Hell. Even assignments to the place were torturous, and some didn't come back. The planet had a cyanide-argon atmosphere, and all the installations were underground- which meant infiltrating them wouldn't be easy, and if they wound up in the wrong segment there was liable to only be one route to the right one, meaning they would need to avoid detection at all costs. There simply wouldn't be any alternative roads to try. Nor, Noble supposed, would they be able to settle in the brush somewhere and wait for things to calm down.

Air would be canned, and precious. He'd seen Aardvark load the extracurricular gear, among them being the vacuum suits. He personally hated them- he wasn't sure if they bothered Aardvark at all. If they did, he mused, she likely wouldn't show it. For a time, Noble Hunter would play this her way. Perhaps things would turn out, and they would all three- Wildfire included- walk home free. Best if they didn't need to leave such a stain on the world as testament to their presence as a completely obliterated installation.

Scene Six

Two days have passed.

Aozora placed the data pad on the top of the stone pillar sconce, the one currently active the other cold and unlit for several centuriesâ€¦ perhaps more. Twisting, he lifted a hoof, and pulled on the armor just above it, wishing he weren't wearing it so he might not need to tolerate a rather mundane thing such as an itch right where he couldn't get at it. But that was normal- cover somewhere so

that it cannot be easily harmed, and that spot is where an itch would form. Lowering his leg, he sighed, tired of the games he had to play in an attempt to stay ahead of that annoying- and damned good-mole.

If it was one of the councilors, he knew they were in trouble. Dispatching one would leave an obvious open space where a power figure once stood. Much like acing a Prophet. If it was a new recruit, whoever had taken him into their fold would be subject to unkind scrutiny, evaluation and examination. If it was a member of his Strike Team, he would never be able to trust his judgment again- he had selected each one himself. Some had even gotten accolades from Council members. Worse still, if it was one of the ones scouring the galaxy for prospective recruits, new members, they might have spread word of the Mirratord all over the place, transforming them from myth to mystery, and that was downright unacceptable.

Taking the data pad from atop the stone sconce, the Admiral resumed his walk. Sometimes he saw where he was going- not that he really had any destination in mind- and sometimes he looked at the data pad, altering and adding to the files contained therein. He did wonder why he had neither heard from nor seen Aardvark since he'd given her the mission of finding and routing the mole, but he had seen her sister- the Sage-Bard that she kept as a close confidant- and he knew that Acalade would know where her wayward sibling was and even what she was up to.

Deciding if it was worth knowing, worth the risk of having the converse overheard, though, was consuming much of his thought. If he jeopardized what she was working on, he might not have the time nor the chance to try and catch that mole by another method. As it were, time was precious, and the longer they harbored the fellow the worse things became. If he somehow managed to hack into some of their more confidential documents, even the Prophets themselves would be shocked into stillness to see all that had been accomplished. That was the last thing Aozora needed, and the last thing that the Mirratord needed. Silence, secrecy, at all costs, and here they were incapable of even protecting themselves from their own.

It was sobering, and frightening, to think this was happening. Who, what, where, had gone wrong? Why? Certainly there were no answers to this question, but it all soon would be revealed, whether by the army that came to wipe them out or by the mole when they caught him. Aozora could only hope it was the latter event, and sooner rather than later.

Stepping from the more disused sectors, he paced down a corridor looking for someone to corner. The dark was where he'd been operating for so long that he was used to it, but being in it all the time, lost for means, was getting old. He hadn't gotten a real status report in almost a month, and the informational black hole between him and his contacts was beginning to get to him.

Somehow, he would find a way to get past the mole, find a way to trick him into giving his own contact some false information, and if they were lucky, this revelation would rout him to the surface when he asked why. Getting him to believe a lie enough to forward it to his superiors would be the difficult part.

His attention fell to his data pad again and he forgot to stop the

first few to go past him, but their passage reminded him what he was missing- and he looked up right into the face of a member of his Strike Team. "Warbirds." He exclaimed, a little surprised. "Whatâ€¢ happened? By the gods you look peeved."

"I am unsurprised that I do, Admiral, because I am. Very, very peeved." Warbirds huffed. "Did you know that Aardvark has been reported missing? Her and Noble Hunter both vanished tracelessly, and no one we ask around here knew they were even gone."

"Theyâ€¢ what? When was this?" Aozora asked. His data pad was tucked into his belt, the contents therein forgotten. "Did anyone see anything? Where were they last?"

"Aardvark was in the east gardens with her sister, and Noble was reportedly by the craft bays, taking one of his pieces of equipment apart."

"Did anyone see them leave?"

"No, sir." Warbirds said. "You should either be damned concerned or very proud, depending on the true nature of this situation, Admiral- either they're so good at this presence is a mystery thing that they gave even us the slip, or someone else did, and aced them both because for the last moments that anyone saw either they were both alone."

"Aloneâ€¢ alone as in the last person who saw them was leaving their vicinity?"

"Yes sir, as in that."

"Anyone else?"

"Not as yet, sir, but the rest tend to run in packs of two or three."

"Why would the mole risk compromising his situation by killing us?"

"How did he manage it with a female like Aardvark is a question I'd ask." Warbirds muttered. "She fights without rule."

"Perhaps, Warbirds, but she isn't immortal." Aozora blew a sigh. "How many others know of this?"

"Just you, Acalade, and the other three I questioned when I went looking for Noble. They don't know I couldn't find him, though." Warbirds answered. "The fact that neither are on base is not yet public."

"Good, keep it that way. Tell anyone who asks that they're out on assignments."

"And Acalade?"

"She'd know the truth anyway, so just tell her not to tell anyone else."

"Yes sir."

"What else have you seen?" Aozora asked, moving into a casual walk, Warbirds falling in at his side and matching pace.

"Not that much. Some of the newer recruits are acting jumpy, a few of them concerned they'd be accused of being that mole. Something tells me he's more than just a Minor or a Major. This fellow has access- how much I'm not sure, and what got him started is still in question along with his identity, but he's definitely got some access."

"How much?"

"I can't say, per marc, but we found some tampered files this morning."

"Which ones?" Aozora pressed.

Warbirds shook his head. "Encryption coding for the access ports into the member roster. He was trying to find out all our names. Possibly some background on each, too."

"Did he crack it?"

"No, but we think he didn't only because he ran out of time. It looks like it was left in a hurry, like someone had come in and he didn't want to be caught red handed so he fled the scene."

"Prints?"

"It's times like these I wish we had the standard security vid feed like most military installations, Admiral- glove prints, that's all. And better than sixty percent of us wear that kind of glove- including me."

Aozora sighed, frustrated. "Damnation."

"Who found it first?"

"Tartan 118."

"What did he say? Did he see anyone coming or going?"

"Going, sure- twenty or thirty people all congregated in the Archives to try to find a particular event because there had been this argument that it hadn't been documented and someone else was convinced that it had. They left, he went in, he was leaving when he heard something, and when he went to check it out, there was someone else coming in so he waved them over. The hack site was discovered, but no person."

"That's a lot of traffic to get past."

"Yes, it is, and according to Sol 249, who was sitting outside watching them all pass, he never saw anyone go in while the room was empty."

"Was he the one that went in and found Tartan?"

"No, that was Highland."

"He's come back? And he didn't report in?"

"He was looking for you, Admiral, and I daresay that the Archives is where you're most often to be found." Warbirds answered.

Aozora sighed. "Okay, so where do we start?"

"I'd check on Sol, and just to be sure, Tartan and Highland too, but Tejan55 found us in the middle of a meeting, so I'd see about drilling his ear, as well."

"Our enemies multiply!"

"Don't be that way, Admiral. We'll just question each of them, and if there's nothing harmful, we'll let them return to their duties."

"We've already examined a number of our people, Warbirds, and it doesn't seem to be helping."

"What do you mean? You've ruled them out. Right?"

"Not at all. They've merely decreased the likelihood of their being the mole, is all. Better still, the one I thought was the least likely has gone completely missing, a typical sign of a spy that knows his tracker is close."

"You think it's Aardvark??" Warbirds asked, astounded.

Aozora shrugged. "I don't think it's anyone. I just can't rule anything out, at this point."

"Due to circumstances!" Warbirds finished.

"Yes." Aozora said. "Due to circumstances."

Scene Seven

Four days have passed

Wildfire's mind simmered at the bottom of consciousness. He wasn't sure where he was anymore, but he was pretty sure he hadn't moved much. Jiralhanae guarded this place, he'd noted that on his way in. The minor Prophet in charge of his torture and interrogation was one of two, and they alternated who got to beat him senseless- of Sangheili, there was only himself.

As much as he was able, though, he'd kept his mouth shut, between inescapable howls and screams for the agony. Even though he knew it wasn't true, he just kept telling himself he'd had far worse and this was bearable- he'd see an opening soon and be able to escape. If he found his tormentors on his way out, he knew he'd kill them both horribly just for spite, though.

So farâ€| nothing. Wildfire wasn't sure if he wanted to live through this anymore, as even after the fifteenth application of mind-altering drugs he still held enough coherency to think what he'd do when he got loose. Something had definitely snapped, even if it wasn't what the Prophets had been hoping would, and now he just hung there simmering at the bottom of his mind, either unable or unwilling

to come a surface, and uncaring which was the case. Sound could still reach him there, and sometimes he would listen to it, but most times he tuned it out. The Prophets liked to think that sweet-taking to him would make him open up, but it was a bitter realization and they were nothing but cruel and evil creatures, interested only in what they wanted, without thought for recompense to those that suffered to get them there. Wildfire wondered why the Prophet was playing back a recording of two Sangheili speaking, but when he realized he recognized the voices and had names for both, it worried him.

Just to see if they too had been captured, and dragged here to hang with him, Wildfire pulled himself from the bottom and opened his one good eye. He wasn't blind in the other nor had it been plucked out, but it had been glued shut with sticky blood from farther up on his head. The image was blurry at first, but the Prophets liked to keep their work spaces well lit, so when he finally did manage to blink the fuzz out of the image, he saw clearly across the room.

A whisper of what might have been a mirage shifted in his vision off to the left, then moved straight for him. A firm grip found his wrist, as the metal cuff was unlocked, but Wildfire didn't need to see who or what it was to smile. He recognized the feel of that hand—it was Sangheili, and he was free.

Whether he'd died to get this or not was to be seen, but for now he was happy enough to see something besides racks and rows of torture equipment between ugly Prophet or Jiralhanae faces. His bloodied mandibles flexed slightly as he tried to ask who was taking him down, but his throat was too dry to permit speech, and all he managed was a soft rasping hiss as he exhaled. Once free of the bonds that had held him up for better than a week, Wildfire crumpled, held aloft now only by an invisible arm wrapped around his waist. The operative took one of his, and pulled it over their shoulder, before starting for the door. There were no vents, no secondary exits here. It was the corridor, or solid rock. Halfway down the length of the room, a second operative shimmered beneath a light fixture, and soon he too had faded from view, as his old equipment was reaffixed to his person, still on the belt that had taken from him at the beginning.

Wildfire was surprised to hear those voices again, this time knowing which was which, when the pair exchanged a short debriefing on the status outside. There was a guard detail here and at their exit, and an electromagnetic storm they had to beat or they'd become permanent residents when it blew through, frying everything in their escape craft. Ah, stealth and speed—they were Mirratord alright. He was home.

The female holding him up transferred him to her male counterpart, and she slipped off up ahead, through the door and down the hall to make sure it was all clear. He grinned to himself when he realized his new lean was wearing four swords. They would leave nothing for scrutiny, here. This was good.

Once outside the room, they bypassed the Jiralhanae guards one by one and slowly, careful in the well-lit environment not to cause enough notice to make one look directly at them. As long as they remained in the guard's peripheral, they were safe, but so much as a casual glance in their direction would betray their presence to all. Up the corridor, the other operative came back, closing the distance in a

short amount of time. More was communicated to the one holding him up, before something sharp echoed down after them. The three of them flattened against the wall, and held perfectly still there, waiting for the new arrival to storm past. New haste was obtained after this party was gone, though, as in the middle of those Brutes was a Prophet.

Wildfire would be missed, and real soon.

Faster now, they conveyed him along the passage to a maintenance port where they slipped through and across the oxygen feed processing chambers and up, traveling through the bar hatch tubes that followed the main track where incoming vessels would send their shuttle craft. It was almost like veins next to a throat. Wildfire couldn't keep his hands closed under any kind of pressure, nor would his legs hold his weight, and though he was trying he knew he wouldn't be going up against the gravity of the planet if his two companions weren't lifting him.

At the top, they pulled him free of the tunnel and draped him between them, before making the distance to their ship. By the time they'd gone that far and had gotten the airlock sealed again, though, Wildfire couldn't see anything, and had lost the ability to connect thoughts in coherent patterns. Much of his mind felt black, empty, a place he didn't want to fall. Someone said something to him, but it didn't register. Urgency in the voice turned from him to someone else, and a moment later, right when he thought he'd never see the surface again, something shocked his system back into operation.

His eyes both snapped open, and he inhaled hard. Everything was painfully clear, without buffer. There were two faces looking back, but neither were Jiralhanae or that of a Prophet. He blinked, feeling the crusted blood on his skin. "Whâ€?"

"Welcome back, Wildfire." The one on the left smiled at him. "We thought we'd lost you there for a moment."

"What did you do to me?" He asked, trying to sort through his thoughts as his brain came back online.

"You were going blue on me. I had to give you an injection of stiff stims to bring you back. Basically a cocktail of things like adrenalin, caffeineâ€| that sort of thing."

"Oh." So that was what that strange, euphoric buzz in the background wasâ€|

"Wildfire, I need to know if you told them anything."

He focused on her face, sifting through memory for what her name was. Aardvark- she was Aardvark. The Strike Team had come after him?? He felt endangered and honored all at once. "I dâ€| don'tâ€| know."

"You don't know?" She asked.

"It's all a little fuzzy right now." He ran a hand over his head. "I don't know."

"You give it some deep thought, alright? And stay put. Noble and I

are going back in to clean up the mess." She stood straight, and motioned at her companion before putting her helmet back on. For some reason, she felt a need to discard it before speaking to someone while on a mission under circumstances like this. Settling it, she stepped back into the airlock, and Noble with her. A moment later, the two were gone. He didn't doubt they would leave no one alive in that installation, now that he was out of it.

Wildfire buried his face in his hands. This could all too easily be the end.

Scene Eight

Mask of Acalade picked up the data pad lying on the plain cot, the room spartan and the blanket across the cot neatly tucked and turned down. Aardvark had a thing for being neat, but at the same time she could feel right at home in the middle of what could only be described as a junk heap. There had been a time when she had accumulated all of her things in one small room, so that it overflowed, but this small room was not it.

Had she decorated a whole house, it might have been tastefully sparse, but she was the kind of person who kept a den- a nest- and the rest of the abode would lie as empty as if no one owned it. Here, all she kept was what she needed- the cot, and the data pad. Acalade looked at the pad, and shook her head. It had been embossed with scrollwork, making it possibly the most decorated data pad in history. Simple, yet elegant, a small taste of the bard's artisan past.

Leaving the pad where she'd found it, Acalade left the personal quarter, and paced the bare stone hall down to another chamber where she could find sustenance. Halfway there, she paused to survey the warrior blocking her path. "Is something wrong?" She asked.

"Do you or do you not know where Aardvark is?" Aozora asked.

"Is she missing?" Acalade returned.

"That isn't what I asked." Aozora informed her, simply. "I don't know where she is, and no one else I have asked knows. You always know."

"Yes." Acalade dipped her head in agreement. "I always do."

"Even if she didn't tell you you'd know, because you could scry her by your abilities as a Sage." Aozora took a step forward. "Where is she, Acalade?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I were me, because if I told you then I'd have something nasty to deal with after Aardvark got back."

"Yes, perhaps we both might. But where is she, Acalade? I have warriors in custody of the enemy, warriors dead, warriors missing. I suppose you would tell me if she were dead, wouldn't you?"

"I guess I could grant you that much, so yes."

"Is she alive?"

"She is."

Aozora nodded. "Thank you. But you won't tell me where she is."

"No, Admiral, I won't. She told me you told her not to trust you with that information."

"Oh, I see." Aozora shook his head. "The both of you confound me, you know."

"We are as we were made, Admiral, and we shall always be this way. Whether you understand that is up to you." She nodded a shallow bow, and swept past him.

He closed his eyes, and sighed, frustrated and confounded all at once. "Where does it end?" He whispered, more to himself than anyone listening. Turning from the place, he made his own way, through the maze of winding corridors to attend a Council meeting he'd been asked to join. If he lived this down, he would be surprised, as even though it was only three weeks old, it had proven to be more heartburn than he was prepared to deal with.

Arriving at the obscure location in the deep end of the city ruin where few if any walked, he stepped through the weathered archway to the attention of more than a few lit swords. He looked at each, then at the gathered faces, to find one of them missing.

"What did I miss this time?" He asked, noting RAG3's presence. The Supreme Commander didn't often have time away from the fleets he commanded to attend Mirratord meetings, but apparently this situation had become top priority.

"The situation grows ever more dire, Admiral." Lai answered, as the gathering deactivated their defenses.

"What happened?" Aozora asked. He counted the Councilors again. No, one wasn't missing; it was the retired member that wasn't there. This was strange in that that particular fellow almost never left the Mirratord's company for sheer lack of a wont or need to be elsewhere.

"The Lone Heretic is missing. We suspect this time that the Prophet Hierarchs aren't in on it, but that makes it worse. We don't know where he is, but he disappeared right off this planet on which we stand as of now."

"When?"

"This morning. We did a sweep. He's not on the planet anymore, and the only ships moving we detected were all inbound."

"You think the mole has something to do with this? Gaining collateral in case he needs to barter his freedom when we catch the bastard?" Aozora asked.

"It's a considered possibility."

"I've lost track of certain members of my Strike Team, Councilors. Our people are disappearing at a phenomenal rateâ€| and I just received a report that Wildfire is dead."

"He was found?" Soulguard asked.

"He'd been captured, Soul, and was in custody for four or five days." Lai told him.

"Arxaon is also unaccounted forâ€|" Aozora said. "We have more problems than merely being spied upon."

"I sent Arxaon on a personal mission." Lai said, soothing. "Do not think everything that is happening without you is for ill of this group."

"I would appreciate knowing, Councilor, lest I begin to think I need to start really hurting those I question." Aozora mentioned.

Lai smiled a mirthless smile. "Who have you seen?"

"Only half of those being questioned- Warbirds is on the task as well."

"You trust him with this task?"

"Who would I trust- we are falling apart because of this spy, and he doesn't need to be making certain members disappear to do it!"

"Calm yourself, Admiral. We have some information that might narrow down your search vectors by a great deal."

Aozora focused on the Councilor, then, attentive. "He left a trace?"

"She left much more than that, Admiralâ€| you aren't going to like this."

Scene Nine

Aardvark pulled Wildfire to his hooves, and supported him there until he had found his balance. Steadying him with a hand on his shoulder, and with Noble Hunter on his other side, Aardvark walked Wildfire out of the ship and through the landing sector into the corridors leading to the medical quarters. He'd improved on the trip, but he still needed a great deal of aid if he expected to ever get back fully up to his old standard.

Leaving the two males at the medical chambers, Aardvark moved on, looking for Acalade. She wasn't hard to find. In the amphitheatre, standing quietly in the very middle of the floor, Acalade was looking straight up at the epicenter of the domed ceiling. "Hello, Aardvark." Her greeting echoed seven times before becoming less than understandable, but Aardvark had heard her the first time.

"You don't look happy to see me, sister."

Acalade turned her dour gaze from the ceiling to regard the new arrival. "They are looking for you."

"Then I shall go to them." Aardvark answered. "I found Wildfire- and have returned him intactâ€|"

"It doesn't matter. Your disappearance has pointed some fingers at you, sister. If you go to them, if they find you, your next move will either spell your death or see you condemned forever to a very dark, very unpleasant place in the depths of the caverns beneath this place. And if you go there, Aardvark, you will not come out again."

"That statement can have many meanings, sisterâ€| but I understand your point." Aardvark blew a sigh, and rested a hand on the side of her head. "What do you suggest."

Acalade shook her head. "You have to avoid them, sister- until this is over."

"How in the world do I do that." Aardvark scowled. "Even if I were at the ends of the universe they could find me."

Acalade smiled. "Don't run. He's here, now- if you run you can't clear your name, nor could he be caught. Also, I have bad news."

Aardvark closed her mouth, pausing. "â€| what?"

"Lone was taken. He's beyond my reach, Aardvark- you have to find the spy and make him tell you where he put Lone before he can be killedâ€| or no one will ever find him, and he will die where he is caged."

Aardvark stiffened in anger, but remained silent.

"Check your temper, Aardvark. You need all the elements on your side. Surprise will be your best asset, and stealth next to it. You are alone, sister- even your allies are hunting you now."

"The Admiral-!" Aardvark started to protest.

"You put that faith in him, sister, he didn't put it in you. True, it hurts him to think you could betray him like this, but even though you haven't they will never believe you because you disappeared and you shouldn't have."

"Have you been setting me up?" Aardvark demanded, glaring her sister down.

"You think I enjoy watching them hunt you like prey, sister?! I am as much a target of scrutiny as you!" She pushed Aardvark back a step.

"I would be used against you by them if they thought it would help!"

Aardvark snarled at her. "Then tell me something usefulâ€| who is he? Where can I find him? I will tear his throat out for what he has done."

Acalade sighed. "For a thread of hope you kill them all. For love of one you turn on all else. At the end of alliances is death's call, and the sacrifices burn in denial of self." She shook her head. "You cannot expect me to condone what you are about to do."

"I do not ask that you participate."

"You ask for my assistance by asking for direction."

"Do not try my temper!" Aardvark snapped.

"Do not try mine!" Acalade snapped back. "I am not the enemy here, and you are wasting time and breath!"

"So tell me what I need to know. I sought Wildfire as you advised, and I saw nothing indicating one of our numbers here. You claim you know he is on this world, in this base, right now this very hourâ€! yet you still deny me who!" Aardvark said, forcefully.

Acalade crossed her arms. "I will render no more aid to one that proves ungrateful."

"Ungrateful! You got me indicated as the very spy I seek! Do not speak to me of grace when you know I owe you none at this point. If you lead me to my end in this I owe you even less, sister. I trusted youâ€!"

"And you question my wisdom when you know I have none?" Acalade snapped. "I can tell you only what I see, nothing more. I do not see a face, I do not hear a name!" She waved her arms in gesture and dismissal of the mentioned items. "I cannot tell you what I do not know! I didn't know you would manifest as the enemy because of this, Aardvark. I am not to blame for the suspicious natures of males who do not understand what is happening around them."

"Where, is, he." Aardvark huffed, breathing once for each word to give them all emphasis. "I am bereft of allies and at your claim bereft also of love. I need to see a path I can follow that does not lead to my end and theirs as well." Her hard tone and her voice had both broken.

Acalade took a breath of her own, and let it go slowly. "I don't know. But you'll need to go alone, so don't try to get anyone to attend. They'll all turn you in. Everyone knowsâ€! thinks they knowâ€! you're the target now, Aardvark. You have until sundown."

Aardvark started to speak but Acalade only ushered her to the door again, quickly.

"Go, go now, they'll come here, they'll find you if you linger too long." When Aardvark was gone, vanishing into a dark hall leading down to an unoccupied section of the city, Acalade turned back to see the expanse of the broad, flat open granite floor of the amphitheatre again. "And so it begins."

Scene Ten

Aozora, flanked by D1NGO and Warbirds, was heading back from the medical quarter with some puzzling news. Noble Hunter was returned, and Wildfire was not only alive but back too- and by Noble's word, Aardvark had been with him on that retrieval mission. He still had yet to find her three hours after she'd landed, and that worried him. Practically the whole base was awaiting her arrival, each member instructed to take her down on sight after that last meeting he'd been in. There was no time to call that order down, no time to change

the circumstances. People would die today, because Aardvark didn't take flak from anyone, not even her own. She was armed, and armored, according to Noble. Armed, armored, and peeved. Everywhere he looked, she wasn't there, and he knew how to spot a cloaked operative in the darkest corner. She just plain wasn't anywhere he looked when he looked there.

It was frightening. Maybe he'd been right, to have her captured, if she had been this hard to see while away with Noble. He hadn't reported any unusual behavior, but then he didn't know her well enough to know unusual behavior on her anyway.

Had she been in his sight at all times during the mission? No. Did he know what she was doing, on an unauthorized mission? No. Did she leave anything for someone else to find, take some things considered unnecessary when she left? Not that he knew of. He'd been outside keeping watch when she'd gone in to get Wildfire out of the torture chambers, and had only come in to tell her she was out of time and it was time to go.

Aozora wasn't sure what to think. Nothing had been confirmed or denied. He only hoped he could find her before anyone else did, just in case his fear was unfounded, and his own Strike Team had not after all been breached by the enemy. And if it was legit, he knew he still wanted to be there when she was caught, just so he could ask her why.

Why, after everything. She had been a friend to him for so long he had lost count. Even when she'd been new she'd respected the rules he upheld, even if to date she had a number of increasingly frequent run-ins with disregarding rank. She judged a warrior by his wit and his salt, not his badge, and for some that was cause for irritation. Fortunately, she had weighed and measured Aozora and found him more than worthy of his position. For it she had assigned him practically the only real trust she'd granted.

If anything challenged him, Aardvark took it down. If anything got in his way, Aardvark took it down. If anything false was mentioned of him, she shot it out of the mouths that spoke it with such brutal efficiency as he hadn't seen before. She protected him so he could do his job, had even spoken at length with his mate as though ensuring she was worth his time. Some of it seemed silly. Some of it was bloodletting serious. But for all that time betrayal had never crossed between them, not even in jest. Aardvark had been like his swordarm, if with a mind of its own, always where she needed to be when a threat of any kind presented itself. She had sworn she would never leave him on a battlefield by himself to face whatever enemy.

Now it seemed all promises were off, all bets called. He wasn't sure if he felt hurt or angry, but he supposed the feeling would sort its own self out after this issue was dealt with. Sending Warbirds down one corridor to seal it off, he sent D1NGO down another to see to that one. Arxaon was supposedly on the other side of this sector, but by dilating inward on its center he hoped to keep from losing his quarry if by the off chance she was actually in this sector.

Scene Eleven

Alone, her camouflage active, Aardvark stood in the dark. But she had

never felt so exposed. For the first time, she was honestly without retreat, and failure would result in death, a death from which there was no return. Those who she had once counted on to be her allies, her backup, were now the enemy. Not the one needing strangled to the floor, though, but she knew they would do as much to her if she let them catch her. She had to be on her toes, all the time, and if this dragged out for too long she knew she would lose.

Acalade had been right in that she didn't have much time- but until sundown? That seemed an odd time to call the game. Was her prey going to leave the planet at that time?

It was hard to think of the playing field as so uneven. All her investments were rendered moot, as of that morning, and her last ally had become an enemy upon leaving the medical. Even her own sister couldn't help her now. For all her talents, Acalade was not a warrior. She was a calculatorâ€| logistics, odds, and foresight. She could tell a body if something was a good idea or bad, but not usually why. Where people were, in vague general, and if they still lived or not- nothing specific, but useful in the long run.

Slowly, Aardvark made her way forward. Her own innate ability was less than her sisters, more of a different kind than less powerful, in that she only knew if one was lying by looking in their eyes. If one was hiding something, a little of their hopes and dreams. If someone was about to die, and if they had a choice or not regarding the matter. She would have been the ideal recruiter, but she couldn't bear the thought of being wrong just the once that it took. The only one she had trusted not to fail her in that regard had been her own sister. As of yet, Mask of Acalade was the only one she had ever brought into the fold.

Catching sight of the warrior's back, Aardvark shifted her weight to her other hoof, testing for silence. She didn't know who it was or what they were doing, but her extra sensory perception was telling her she needed to know- she might regret it if she moved past this one without that knowledge.

He could be her mole, or he could just be the one about to rain all the Mirratord down on her head, and she needed the forewarning. She didn't know, and wouldn't, until she was close enough to either see his face, or at least what he was doing. Slowly, she lifted her other hoof from the floor, swung that leg forward, and let the very tip of one half of her cloven ped touch down. Gently, she rolled the hoof so the sole rested on the floor, and then she shifted her weight again, back to that hoof and just one step closer.

As if sensing her, the warrior before her raised his head, and looked around in front of him for a moment before checking behind him. He squinted into the deep shadow she had come out of, and the dim lighting between himself and it. A frown creased his features, but he returned to his task, without further motion or comment.

The computer terminal he was standing at began to replay a sequence of soft noises, and Aardvark used them to mask her steps as she moved forward quickly to close the gap before he either finished and left or realized she was there. Careful not to breathe on him, she stopped at his shoulder, and eased around slightly more to look down at the holographic projection. Her expression turned to surprise. He was looking at the security grid's integrity and status. Were they

expecting an attack, or did they think she would try to deactivate it and call someone in to make one?

Stepping softly, Aardvark turned around the warrior attending the console, and bent close to the hologram to see through it, past the male's helm at his face. Concentration creased his features, but though the lit images floating between them reflected in his glassy eyes, Aardvark could see so much deeper than them. Revelation struck. He was copying the information! She coiled, and sprang, sailing over the desktop and through the hologram, one sword ablaze. A startled shout escaped him as he tried to backpedal away from her, but she had gotten too close and was moving too fast. They connected, and went down.

Her first contact was made with a fist wrapped around the inactive sword in her other hand to stun him, before the lit sword dropped to his throat, sizzling in anticipation of making a cut. But there it froze, as if in stop-motion.

Leaning over it so their faces were inches apart, Aardvark snarled at him, even as his claws found her skin between the armor plates on her swordarm. "You have made a very big mistake, Tartan 118. What were you thinking? We stand for the truth and you're helping the enemy to destroy it."

"You're not the truth, you're a bunch of self-proclaimed messiahs and you believe your own lies you speak them so much. For the honor of the Mirratord! What a laugh, Aardvark. There is nothing but shame here. You've all been misled and lied to and now you think the noble Prophets mean us ill." Tartan replied.

Aardvark hissed at him. "You've stolen something from me, regardless of what establishment who pledges their faith to, and I am going to get it back if I have to burn your eyes out and peel your flesh from your bones to do it."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Lone! Where is he? What have you done with him? Tell me, you filthy traitor!"

Tartan cringed at the sensation of the skin on his throat burning against the light touch of her sword. "I don't know anything about him! He disappeared on his own, I don't know!"

"Liar!" Aardvark snapped. "You wanted to make sure you had something to barter with when we finally caught you. You thought we wouldn't kill you because only you knew where he was. Well guess what. I can have your mind downloaded into a gorram computer and I'll find that information myself! You tell me where he is or I swear you'll be begging that we do kill you, after all, long before we're done with you."

Tartan growled at her. "You'll never find him before he dies."

"You'll die first!" Aardvark lifted the sword, then pulled him from the floor before slamming him back down against it and smacking his temple with the hilt of her active sword. Tearing the helm from his head, she threw it hard so it smacked a couple of other things before

finally finding the floor and settling. "Tell me!"

He coughed, once, before beginning to chuckle. "You've made a mistake, coming here, and attacking me like thisâ€|"

Aardvark hit him in the head with her bare fist. "You sick bastard! How long did you think you could get away with this, marching elbow to elbow with a Sage? We saw you coming." Her tone was dripping acid. "You better start talkingâ€|"

"You didn't see this coming." He interrupted.

Aardvark had only enough time to look up before the fist connected, throwing her small frame from her place atop Tartan, so she tumbled across the floor until she hit the railing around the raised dias they were on. Archive nodes in cube slots above her rattled, but all she could do was try to inhale, as she flicked the power switch on her sword that had been so indirectly used against her. Still shaking from the sudden assault on her nerves, she had no defense when she was pulled from the floor and hit again, but by then she had regained a sense of composure, and sent a return blow, low and centered.

Her assailant gave a pained huff as his air was forced from him, and he bent slightly, so she twisted from his grasp and sent her next blow into the underside of his lowered head. If there was any damage to his throat it wasn't immediately evident, but he crumpled to the floor at her hooves even as she marched back to where Tartan was, partway off the floor himself.

A stiff kick to his middle sent him back down, rolled over, gagging, but he knew better than to remain where he was with a pissed off Strike Team member after him. He scrambled to his hooves, desperate to escape her, though he knew he would likely need several tries even if he was successful. Scrambling upwards, the back of his armor vest was snagged, and a fist found his kidneys. He doubled up backwards, in breathless agony. Her sword flashed back to life, above him, but she left him be again for a merciful moment when someone else found them.

This new arrival fought Aardvark until she laid him out flat with a couple of sword strokes that Tartan was sure had to be fatal. If she was willing to kill her own to get at him, and make him tell her where Lone was, he knew beyond a doubt there was no moral code she would not break, no line she would not cross, when she finally had him alone.

Frightened now, he forced his trembling limbs into motion, and had caught sight of the door- that precious exit- before she caught up to him again. Bloody, bruised and furious, her natural feminine beauty had vanished beneath a mask of deadly calm rage. He'd made her mad, which was likely the worst thing he could have done. Tartan screamed unashamedly when she cut deep through one of his thighs, but though he managed somehow not to fall because of the blow, she hit him with another of those little bitty knobby fists. Big fists he could have managed. But hers were small like needles, and each impact, while significant in pressure power, felt more like being stabbed than smacked.

Howling, Tartan went down, and he was sure it was the last time. With his injuries, he would never get back up. She knelt in the small of

his back, and wrenched his head up. "Where is he?!! What have you done to him?!" All the sweet and melodic serenity from years as a Bard were gone from her voice, as it tore between internal agony and pure, unabridged rage. Tartan could only gasp, his diaphragm pulled too tight for speech, and wonder why that particular retired Council member meant so much to her.

She slapped him across the back of his head, hard enough to daze him, rose from his back and kicked him again, in the gut. She was petite, but by the gods she was cruel! And the pain she could evoke was unrealâ€| Tartan sagged against the floor, gasping, trying not to bite himself for the pain, or scream again in case she reveled in that. He wasn't going to give her anything he didn't absolutely have to. Rolling his beaten carcass to a side, he let himself fall onto his back, so he could see her.

She came back, either to hit him, cut him again or kick him he wasn't sure, but he held up the device in his hand to stop her in her tracks. It usually workedâ€| sadly, this time all that happened was she lashed out all the faster, and he was less a hand. The latent grenade in his severed grasp hit the hard stone floor and rolled, harmless. Tartan heard a sound, felt his throat constricted in outcry, but the two seemed disconnected. He curled his blunt arm against his chest, unable to believe it had come to this.

Looking up at her through watering eyes, he decided she was not in fact a warrior of the Mirratord, nor a soprano Bard from the second Sangheili colony. She was, he was sure, a demon, manifested of the evils of a thousand races.

She bent, her sword raised, her question posed again in threat, but the sound of the great doors to the Archive Quarter booming open drowned her out and all he saw was her mandibles moving. Hooves slammed hard into the stone floor, sending up an echo like no thunder ever could hope, and mid-motion Aardvark was swept away from him, wrestled to the floor by first two, then three, then four people all at once. One hit the floor next to her to the sound of her rabid snarl, but by then she was down, and once there, she could do little against a weight too great for her to move.

Tartan could hear nothing but his own hearts in his head, pounding, poundingâ€| as they slowed their beat, the rest of the world faded out.

Scene Twelve

Aozora had seen her fight that hard only once before. But this time, she hadn't gotten him, but rather Arxaon, and he'd passed out in a crumpled heap on the floor where she'd left him. She was a real animal when she was hell-bent, but now she'd been overwhelmed and overpowered, and subdued. Verily sitting on her, looking down at her, he wondered if she even knew what she had done. Finding her under calmer circumstances might have spared her a great deal of angst. But there was a blood trail, and she'd been stopped, he was sure, just shy of her next victim. Was there any denying it now? Was there? Warbirds went to see if the other two were alive, but came back with incriminating evidence besides them; there was opened data on the Archive terminal, and it was displaying the status and specs on their compound security grids. One was dead, the other mostly unharmed but out cold, and as D1NGO turned back from her latest and last target,

there was a report of mutilationâ€| if he was savable, he wouldn't be good for much.

Aozora turned his gaze from the warriors above him as one went to procure more people, and looked down at the one beneath him. Her expression was placid, but not blank. Without a word she was conveying to him that she felt what he did- and he didn't know why. She thought he'd betrayed her, somehow, and it was evident in her liquid eyes. Deeper, a profound sorrow. Some other element had caused her pain as well. Maybe it was that that had caused her to snap, and prey upon them from the inside. Just the realization that she really was the spy he'd sent her after was striking- and sobering. Still, he had what he wanted- an opportunity to ask her why.

"Aardvarkâ€| "

"You don't know a damn thing, Admiral." She whispered.

"Tell me, then, by the godsâ€| why, Aardvark? I thought I could trust you."

"I'm not the one you're looking for, sir." Her tone was set in concrete, it seemed- emotional agony she couldn't hide. And her volume was almost as set, staying at a bare whisper. "But I found himâ€| I did like you asked, and I found him for you."

"How can you ask me to believe that?" He asked, quietly. "Look at you. You've killed our own, and hurt more. You have blood on your hands."

"We all do, Aozora." She was barely audible, suddenly. "I didn't fail you." Tears streaked across her temples towards the floor behind her head. "I did like you asked. I stopped him."

More of the Mirratord began to arrive at the scene, and the assorted trail of bodies was taken to the appropriate places. Aozora let a pair of the bigger males take Aardvark away, but once she was gone, he just hung his head. Something in the way she had spoken was making him want to rethink her fate following all the evidence. Was it all wrong? Had they missed something? He couldn't dismiss the charges out of hand, though- his superiors would never hear of it. He needed to free her with the same tool they had used to condemn her. He needed evidence. He needed as much or more as had been stacked against her to stack in her favor.

As much as he wondered if he could bear the job, he knew he couldn't just let it drop as it was. There were still unanswered questions. One thing was for sure, thoughâ€| even if all he did was solidify her damnation, he at least would know beyond all doubt that she was what they thought she was. If he didn't dig for this, and failed to find something important that might free her, he knew he would never forgive himself.

Signaling to his Strike Team, he left the room. It was done, for today, and after everything had been sorted out, perhaps the missing pieces would fall into place, and a clearer picture of the world around them would be revealed at last.

Scene Thirteen

Evilkitty stared at the lone other female at the otherwise empty end of the feeding chamber. She had never seen Acalade look so sad. Between Acetylcholine and Maestro, and with Tejan55 across the table, Evilkitty had her share of conversing company. But Acalade sat all alone, staring at the table before her in silence.

"I heard they're training you for the Strike Team." Tejan55 mentioned. "Do you suppose they saw this coming?"

"I don't think I was meant to replace anyone, T." Evilkitty answered. "I was supposed to be one more."

"You're okay with this?" He asked.

"Shouldn't I be? My instructor said I'd be given my swords at the conclusion of my testingâ€| if I pass. After that ceremony, I'm back to learning, this time all about how to use the blades."

"Sweet." Ace mentioned. "You rock."

"I suck. I've got flaws out the wazoo and can't figure out where to start when it comes to amending them all."

"I'm pretty sure they won't let them persist if they really mean to make a Striker out of you, Kitty." Maestro offered, between bites of food. "They know what they're doing."

"Certainly been at it long enough." Tejan added, in agreement. "What are you looking at?" He twisted to see along her sightlines, curious.

"Acalade." She answered. "I wonder if she knew."

"The way she looks now, I'd say she was as clueless as the rest of us were."

"I'm tempted to do an investigation. Why was she chosen as the guilty party? Who decided it was Aardvark and not one of the guys she was taking down- if I am not mistaken- like she was told to do?"

The males looked at her, speculative. "They gathered the evidence before she got back from her last jaunt, Evilkitty." Acetylcholine told her.

"Which was to retrieve Wildfire from enemy hands, by the way." Evilkitty countered. "I'm doing it, you guys do your own thing. I don't know about you but I don't think I'd make much of a Striker if I sat on my hands all the time when my gut is telling me to make some moves." She stood up from the table. "I'm done with this meal anyway."

"I'm in." Ace said, almost reflexively.

"Me, too." Tejan55 offered, looking up at her.

"What the hell." Maestro sighed. "Count me in. We've got a big job, so let's get to it." He rose from his seat as well, the motion followed by the other two shortly. Maybe he'd be commended, maybe not, but it couldn't hurt his recent infraction of the rulesâ€| it

hadn't been intentional on his part, but \$hit happens, and that time it had happened to Maestro.

"For the honor of the Mirratord." They chorused, before splitting up and moving out, reaching for the varied resources each had at their disposal. This time, it meant more than it always had before- now, they were setting off to defend that violated honor, in an attempt to clear up a haunting mess surrounding the leaders and keepers of said group. It really was for the Mirratord's honor.

Scene Fourteen

The Imperial Admiral stared hard at the Major, his bruises in strategic locations. He'd been lucky his solar plexus wasn't hit, as such an impact would have been fatal. But he was upright, with only a minor headache from first being hit in the head and then smacking it off a stone floor.

"Tell me exactly what you saw, in order." Aozora instructed. "All of it."

"I had just come into the Archive Quarter to update my files, and I heard this awful racket coming from the Mains. I went there to see why it sounded like a fight was happening and found that there really was one, sir." He answered. "My attempt at intervention got my rear royally handed to meâ€œ but it was Aardvark, and she was beating the real living hell out of Tartan. Screaming at himâ€œ and things. Tell me this, tell me that. Calling him names."

"Did you see or hear anyone else at all in the chambers with you three?"

"No sir, why?"

"The officer who came in directly after youâ€œ she killed him, and cursed fast. I'm a bit puzzled why she didn't kill you or knock him out, instead. Why the deviation, why the differentiation? Aardvark has always been thorough, and efficient."

This comment only got a thoughtful nod as the Major rubbed his jaw.
"I see, sir."

"Do you know her at all, have you spoken any at all with Aardvark in the past?"

"No sir, not that I recall, not personally at least."

Aozora nodded. "And you didn't pause to call into question her actions before getting involved?"

"I did what I thought was right at the time- I thought she was going to kill him, and I didn't know why so I opted to try to stop her until that circumstance had changed."

"Yes, alright. Dismissed."

"Sir." He saluted, and left, leaving the Admiral in the medical chambers with the unconscious patient contained therein, Tartan 118, and one of his Strike Team, Arxaon.

He sighed. "I confess myself at a loss."

"Have you questioned Aardvark yet, Admiral?" Arxaon asked.

"I want to wait until I have Tartan's word on this before I question her." Aozora said. "I need as many angles of this situation as I can get. I still can't see whyâ€| why her? How, her? Her only weakness is her sisterâ€| right?"

"She is courting, Admiral."

"Well, himâ€| I guess. But everything seemed normal enough for her for this whole episode, yet nowâ€| do you think she knew we thought it was her and tried to do something constructive about it?"

"If the spy were in danger of being caught, I wouldn't understand why she was staying here at the base, sir, I can't answer that question." Arxaon helped.

"We'll be waiting a small while for Tartan to wake up, I imagineâ€| " Aozora sighed. "Maybe I should see what Aardvark has to say. I don't expect to hear much, not at this point."

"The Councilors won't humor your need to find why for long, Admiralâ€| try not to take too much time. She's got a lot of convincing evidence against her, and that incrimination will get her executed. You don't have forever to prove her even more guilty or innocent after all."

Aozora nodded agreement. "I understand that, Arxaon." He cast a look at Tartan's still form, then left, heading to the underground detention blocks. Arxaon, limping, followed in silence.

It took several minutes of walking to span the distance between places, enough time to give more thought to the issue. Upon arrival, Aozora cleared his mind, his expression, and straightened his posture before moving down to the cell where Aardvark was being kept.

Permitted to retain her armor only, but stripped of all else, Aardvark somehow managed to retain an air of dignity despite her surroundings. Bereft of her swords, her cloaking engine, her shield generator, the rest of her equipmentâ€| it didn't seem to make her look any smaller or less intimidating, even though she had always been slight of frame. Her head rose when she heard the sound of their approaching steps, but she neither moved nor spoke even after Aozora had opened the wrought grillwork door and stepped through. Arxaon pulled the door closed behind him, and would stand by it for the duration of the Admiral's stay.

Silence stretched out between them for a long time before Aardvark finally injected something into the void. "Hello, Admiral."

Aozora shook his head. "Why, Aardvark? There is so much I just don't understand."

"Well, we can start with why what." She answered. "You want to know why I left the base unannounced? Why I brought Wildfire back? Why I was in the Archives, hurting people? Why what, Admiral?"

"More towards the start of things, actuallyâ€| why were you feeding the enemy our secrets?"

"You only think you know that was me."

He sighed. "Alrightâ€| supposing it was. Why would you?"

"I'm a fey maniac, Aozora, I don't betray people. I sure as hell don't betray my own goram ideals."

"I still fail to grasp what that word really means."

"I'm not overly enthusiastic about deathâ€| but I'd go there happily if I could take my enemy with me. One of my greater enemies is that which represents living on one's knees. I don't, can't, live on my knees. I'm a part of this group because you offered me a place on my feet."

"Okay, Aardvarkâ€| really. What were you doing, in the Archivesâ€| hurting people, as you put it?"

"Acalade told me you were hunting me. I didn't want to wind up here knowing the real guy was still out there, freer for my passing." She inhaled, and blew it out through her teeth. "For my failing."

"You said you caught him? Is he the one you killed?"

"Him? No." She shook her head. "No, not unless the honorless bugger has friends."

"Then why is he dead, Aardvark? What made you kill him?"

"I was pissed off, okay? Tartan wouldn't tell me what he'd done with Lone and I'd already had to deal with interference before. I didn't want to, but I was out of time. Tartan was getting away."

"Tartan is the spy?" Aozora asked.

"I don't know that he's the only one, if there is only one, but he's one of them, and not one of us, that much is certain. He was downloading copies of our defense net." Aardvark answered.

"Why didn't you just kill him, then, instead of beating him senseless?"

Aardvark shook her head. "Why are you bothering to ask me all this if you and I both know you don't believe a word out of my mouth, Admiral? Why are you wasting your breath? I know I screwed up, I know I'm going to dieâ€| and without the enemy. You don't need to sugarcoat anything, I understand fully what and how you think. I know I'm right, I know you're wrong, but down hereâ€| like thisâ€| I also know there isn't a stinking thing I can do about correcting that."

Aozora started to respond to that, but she put up her bound hands to stop him.

"I also know there's no way in this hell or the next that I'm getting out of here to prove my case, either. You think you've caught your man, Admiral, and I'm sure they're throwing a party up there. But why

are you questioning me, when you know even I couldn't trust me if I were you under these same circumstances?"

"Becauseâ€œ!" He began, slowly, thoughtfully, "maybe I was hoping to hear the truth. Maybe I thought I could still trust you to get me what I needed to get my job done."

"Considering the circumstancesâ€œ you honestly think I'm up to that, sir?"

"One might hope, Aardvark. I know I shouldn't. I know it might cause more grief. But maybe, just maybe, there's something you know that I can use to clear this mess up. So tell me, Aardvark. Are you going to help me bring the truth to the surface, or are you going to tell me to get lost, and save my breath?"

"I would ask only that you best know what you're doing, Admiral. I don't want to walk from this bearing a half-truth. I couldn't live with thatâ€œ you'd wind up killing me anyway when I abandon your Mirratord for its loss of appeal."

"Where do I start, Aardvark?"

"Ask Acalade."

Scene Fifteen

Broken strands of light splashed across the striated stones of the pavilion, in much the same manner that it had the last time he had seen Aardvark passing these corridors. D1NGO understood little of the female, only that she was formidable and knowledge of the fact made him wonder what had caused her to tip over.

He, like most of the Mirratord echelons, understood acutely how she revered the Admiral. She treated him like kin- even when she was mad. This recent development made things seem off-kilter. Like something else had been missedâ€œ overlooked, and forgotten in the maelstrom surrounding the spy's presence.

It seemed everyone had their doubts about whether said individual had been detained or not. He walked past the bars of golden light, ignoring them. Past the first several corridors breaking from the main route he turned into a directly accessible chamber- the fourth entrance of the Archives.

If there was anything worse, it was the awful quiet the place owned every time something bad happened in their ranks. He strode up to the raised dias where the main terminal was, and tapped in a code to reveal the status of the more recently updated files. He was unsurprised to find Aardvark's had been recently accessed, but he didn't look into it, well knowing it was probably a scarring black mark that had been added. Recent reports were becoming more informative, so he paused to look into a few of those. A small indicator light winked on in the panel to his left, so he opened a new window in the terminal to check it out. His eyes widened as he watched the power slowly drain off the power grid.

Then they narrowed. So it wasn't Aardvark- it couldn't be. She was still sealed away from all access ports in the underground section of the old city. He went to turn around, having heard something, and

came face to face with not one but three operatives. D1NGO's expression turned interested. "What are you three doing here?"

"A better question is what are you doing, D1NGO?" One returned, glancing past him at the terminal. "Taking the power grids offline? Why?"

D1NGO's mind suddenly whirled. "Oh, hell."

Scene Sixteen

Aozora looked up, noticing the entrance of an uninvited visitor. It was Evilkitty- looking a little frazzled, slightly bruised and wearing her new weapons. But her expression was what got his attention the most. "What happened?" He asked, as he stood up from behind the desk where he'd been sitting for the past two hours.

"Three of our people just caught D1NGO taking the security grid offline, Admiral." She stated, flatly.

Aozora stiffened at the news. "_D1NGO_???"

Evkitty nodded, curtly. "Yes sir. D1NGOâ€| in the act."

"Gods. Where does it end?"

"I don't know, sir. But they've taken him down to where Aardvark is, the only difference being he didn't kill anyone or put Arxaon down."

Aozora shook his head, trying to stop it from spinning. "Greatâ€| just great. Was there anything else?"

"Uhâ€| just the little detail of there being an unfriendly vessel heading insystem marked on the sensor grids." She offered. "I think the security grid's deactivation was in preparation of communicating our position to them."

"For destruction." Aozora finished. He sighed. Two of them, now.
"Thank you, Evilkitty, you may goâ€| unless there's more?"

"No sir, not that I know of at present."

He nodded, and she departed as he tried to think what in the world had gotten into his Strike Team to so bring ruin down upon them all. His personal communications unit chimed, getting his attention. Opening the channel, he answered it, "Aozora."

"Admiral, you better come down here." It sounded like a middle-ranking member of the Mirratord, known as Lord Snakie, or just Snake to those in passing.

"Where is here?" Aozora asked, as he left the office.

"Here is the maintenance bridges, sir. I'm standing here looking at some very curious jury rigging." Snake said.

"Jury rigging on what?"

"The masking field generators." He sounded like he was in the middle of doing something. "Like someone pulled the power conduits and rerouted them so they'd back up and overload, maybe fry something in the lines."

"I'm on my way."

"Is anyone coming with you, sir?"

Aozora paused, but only for a moment, before taking down a flight of steps to the power generators chambers. "No, I just received another report that one more of the Strike Team has betrayed our interestsâ€œ so I am a little wary of trusting them at this point."

"â€œuh, understood sir."

"It seems this rot has gone fairly deep." Aozora mentioned. "Which bridge are you on?"

"The second one, sir." Whatever Snake had been doing, now he was done, but Aozora caught sight of his profile across the first bridge, and saw him wave at him, as if to signal where he was. Aozora went ahead and turned the communicator off, without any closing comment, as a moment later he was within shouting distance and a moment after that within speaking distance. He came to a stop looking with puzzled countenance at the officer, the mentioned jury-rigging all in plain view beside him.

Putting the cutting and crimping tools down, Snake met the Admiral's gaze. "Glad you could make it, Admiral." He said, clasping his hands together. "You see, there's something about the bridges' power coils that makes even the most experienced tech cautious of getting anywhere near them while they're running. The fluids are combustible, the voltage is enormous and the insulation is as thin as regulations allow to cut down on bulk space."

Aozora hesitated, casting a glance at the humming machine when its tone changed. "What are you saying, Snake?"

He shrugged, parting his hands again. "I'm saying, Admiral, that it's a good thing you came alone. We wouldn't be wanting too much collateral damages, now would we?" He turned his head, slightly, and looked over the railing at the field buffer zone- basically a large open airspace- beneath the catwalk the bridge pillars stood along. Aozora suddenly recognized what was going on, but he had only enough time to reach out and snag Snake by a leg as he leapt nimbly from the railing, stretching out over into freefall, before the aforementioned overload spiked the power generators' load bearing capacity and arcs of free electricity as thick as Aozora's thigh snapped like thunder from the crossed and exposed lines. Eight hundred volts of free electricity snapped outwards towards him, seeking ground, but he was on the catwalk where that grounding rod was connected.

In a frozen heartbeat his Mirratord augmented shielding had completely drained, the alarm activating for a bare half second in his ear before the second crawling arc snapped to the railing and melted it right in half. Snake's shin armor was welded to it, along with Aozora's vest and thigh plating. Neither could hear themselves screaming, but the next popped right over Aozora's shoulder, ruining the synapse response in his brain, and re-heated their collective

metal devices.

The Admiral crumpled to the catwalk deck plating, sizzling and steaming, but Snake cracked loose at the behest of the end of that last arc, and fell smoking all the way to the bottom of the buffer zone, where he landed badly. His poly-fiber cable had been cooked completely off, as though he had had no intention of actually hitting bottom originally, he had deliberately not gotten a metal cable because it would have conducted the electric discharges down to him. For all his planning, though, he died on impact.

Scene Seventeen

Evilkitty stood staring at the readouts, Maestro and Fastrigger somewhere elsewhere in the same chamber. This was where the solar monitoring equipment was kept, and where the inbound vessel could be seen and observed. She studied the image for several minutes before deciding it wasn't the model with the newest deep-space probing sensor array on it. They wouldn't know which planet they were looking for unless they were toldâ€¦ but with the recent power failures- how in the world whoever had figured out how to shut one of those generators down was a mystery- there was no way to recharge their security grid and activate the force field. It didn't take a genius to know the signal buffer field was down too- that would have been a given.

All that ship was waiting for was a signal, and there was no way to stop it from getting one. Evilkitty snarled to herself, set the monitors to standby and left the chamber, heading down to see what she might find in the generator room. Even the lighting was flickering in some places, where power had been mostly from that one generator in particular. Backup feeds from the other two had kept the places from being plunged into complete darkness, but in the end it was only a sparse help.

Evilkitty still wound up squinting when she reached a place that had a sun roof, the ancient architecture of the old city varying between covered and open, some of it underground and some of it several stories high. Shading her eyes with a hand, she moved on through, past a column-supported roof and down the first flight of stairs she thought would lead her to her destination.

Turning through a hub chamber where several halls connected, she made for the open cavernous place where the Mirratord had set up their power mains. The smoky scent of burning meat and the fumes of evaporated metal stung at her nostrils before she had even covered the last curve, but when she entered the chamber, she drew back, wiping at her burning eyes and choking on the thickened, blackened air. Ducking beneath the smoke layer, she glanced up to see it had filled the upper portion of the fifty foot domed ceiling. Coughing, Evilkitty made her way across the catwalk to investigate the nature of the problem. If the power had been on, there would not have been any smoke here, but the other two were operating at minimum base capability to avoid another overload- in case it was really a true back-logged problem. Coming upon the second bridge, Evilkitty first noted the charred marks all over the place, and the portions of the catwalk that were malformed or missing. Then she noted how the casing door was gone, and all the exposed wiring and boards were out of place. She was no tech- hardly had an eye for what would burn out- but this was obviously not right, and even to her inexperienced eye

she saw it had been no accident.

Stepping closer in the shadowed gloom to the cooling mess, her hoof found a blockage in the path and her balance shot out. Slamming to the catwalk on her face, she froze for a moment in terror when she heard the thing groan, the integrity of the catwalk long since compromised but more or less stable as yet. If she hit it again like that, though, it was liable to snap in half and her exit would be complicated at best. Gathering her legs up and propping onto her knees, Evilkitty turned to see what had tripped her up.

Closer, she was able to see the other Sangheili, but it took her a moment to realize who it was. Deep gouges and scoring covered his left shoulder and down the front of his vest in the armor that he wore, but even at a glance through the gloom she could tell all his things, his equipment, were beyond ruined. Both swords had slagged into the clasping loops on his gear belt, and even the buckle was melted, the look of it making her wonder if it had not seared the belt itself and saturated it so it would never come off him without being cut.

"Admiral?" She asked, waving at the wafting smoke. If he was alive- it was difficult to tell, under the current circumstances- he wasn't conscious, but she wasn't sure if moving him would be a good idea. Still choking on the smoke in the air, Evilkitty decided it mattered less than just getting him out of here- if he really was still alive, he didn't need to be breathing the smoke any more than she did.

Taking an arm, she slung it across her shoulders, and hauled his limp body from the plating of the catwalk before turning from the ruined generator and making her way back the way she had come. Beneath her, the tortured metal groaned and creaked, telling her she either needed to hurry, or plan on learning to fly on short notice.

Somehow, even under the load, Evilkitty made the door, from whence she started for the medical chambers. She wanted some answers, regarding what she had just seen. So far it had been impossible to prove anyone was really doing anything at all, in this ongoing case, because there was either no witnesses, or the ones that were there were the ones that came in too late to witness anything other than the after effectsâ€¦ and they might not even have been the first to come in after the fact, but the ones to come in after the one that got ultimately incriminated.

For what it was worth, Evilkitty hoped she wasn't blamed like Aardvark and D1NG0, or worse, had to deal with a change of command that wasn't likely to go over well with anyone if Aozora was charged. He was the only one there, and it had been crossed by intent. But why stand there long enough to get fried? Little, if anything, made sense.

Upon her arrival at her destination, the medics took the Admiral from her before attending her own respiratory problem. Wildfire looked at her from across the room, his eyes questioning but his tongue silent. Tartan, for himself, was awake, but uninterested in the goings-on around him. He had a data pad in hand, and was tapping in code doing something random.

Evkirkitty looked them over, before turning to see as the medics began

to cut, pry and break the Admiral out of his armor. There was little left that was good for much except melting down and re-forging into something else, perhaps. When her lungs had been cleared and her breath restored, Evilkitty turned to leave; but the door was pushed open before she could touch it to reveal a Councillor on the other side.

Lai looked her up and down, then cocked his head.
"Evikitty?"

"Councillor?" She returned, sounding just as puzzled.

"I heard word you were seen with the Imperial Admiralâ€|" He began.

"He's been fried." She told him, stepping back to allow the Councillor access to the room. He entered, and looked over to where most of the activity was. His expression turned to that of partially concealed horror.

"Forerunnersâ€| what happened?"

"I have no idea. Only that he was too close to that down generator when it spat fire."

"Fire could not have done much to his shields, Evilkitty, let alone this to his armorâ€| to him." Lai informed her. "I half wonder what he was doing that close to that generator when it went."

"I didn't see anyone elseâ€|" Evilkitty heard herself say, before she realized she really ought to keep her mouth shut in case she had missed something important. "But the whole room was so full of black smoke that I had to trip over him before I found him thereâ€|"

Having heard her exchange of tone, Lai gave her a scrutinizing look.
"You sound like you are defending him. What did you really see, Evilkitty?"

She backed up a step, alarmed. "I wasn't there!" She protested. "I only went because I wanted to see if anyone was looking into the power loss."

Lai shook his head. "Come with me." He turned, and left the chamber, fully expecting her to follow of her own accord.

Swallowing her fear of what she now saw as inevitable, Evilkitty forced herself to do just that, though she really only wanted to run full tilt the other way. She knew where she was heading nowâ€| and what was about to happen to her.

Interrogations were never fun.

Scene Eighteen "There are things I will not do

And things I will not say

There are ideals that I hold

That I cannot betray

There are places people go

Where I cannot be found

Never truth shall I deny,

For I am honor bound.

Easy lies yonder a path that many choose to claim Sliding yon with neither hold of misery nor pain

Yet always in the end these high flying do come down

And find that they have drifted o'er unfriendly groundâ€|"

The sound of her voice was echoing all over the cellblock, making it hard to pinpoint where she really was. But D1NGO had heard the song before and he knew the melancholy tint to her voice this time was slightly off-key for the song she was singing.

Aardvark wasn't one to easily succumb to depression, although she had been known to feel so out of sync with the world around her that communicating with her seemed nigh impossible, and only her sister could snap her out of it. He rested his head on a hand, that elbow on a knee, and heaved a sigh. To his chagrin, even that sound echoed, though it only lasted once, under the mellow soprano song that seemed to dominate all else. It wasn't a bad song, he supposed, listening to the next few stanzas. But why she was singing that one under these circumstances baffled him.

Found guilty of treason and treachery, labeled a traitor and shoved into a cell until there arose time to deal with her, he had to marvel at how Aardvark could still find solace in her Bard's skills. She was one of the wonders of the universe, he was sure, in that no matter what else was happening, she would only be what she deemed worthy of her current mood. Unlike D1NGO, who could only find time to brood. He knew he hadn't done anything wrong, but he had no witness to that effect, and knew anything he said to that end wasn't liable to gain him much. For a time, he allowed himself to listen to the song the Bard was lifting, an escape where his mind might find better use than dwelling on certain events he couldn't change and had no power to prevent. Right when he was about to start humming idly along, preferring the tune to the mind-wrecking silence, she stopped, mid-word, mid-stanza, mid-tune. The abrupt change brought his attention around, but he didn't get to call out to her and ask why she had stopped so abruptly, as he soon discovered why. His eyes grew wide in surprise and shock when he saw a pair of Ultras walk by, verily carrying Evilkitty, who looked listless.

Standing, he moved to the fore of his cell, and pressed against the bars, to see where they were going to put her. Down the hall, he heard Aardvark speak, and her words almost made him laugh aloud.

"You don't really know who you're after, do you?"

One of the Ultras snapped something at her that was too short and too loud for him to discern what it had been as the echo of the word overlapped itself too many times by the time it reached him.

Her reaction to the unintelligible comment startled even D1NGO. "You _what_?" She shrieked.

"What is going on down there?" He called. "Why are you locking her up? What happened?"

"Shut up." One of the Ultras hissed, walking back the way he had come. The other one had paused to share wit and words with Aardvark- a mistake, D1NGO was sure, considering how articulate the little female was.

He stood in silence as the one left and the other got his tongue lashing of the day, listening to the exchange. First something metal smashed against more metal, then something metal smashed hard against something stone, making him jump nearly out of his skin in fright. "What in creation is happening over there??" He demanded.

Words he never thought he'd hear coming from Aardvark echoed lightly down the stone corridor, lilting from cell to cell on her odd, soft accent. She was the least religious of them all, with her own brand of unique belief that held no connection to the origins of the common prayer she now employed over her latest victim.

"Lord of the heavens, heed my thoughts,
>let good survive and evil halter.
May night follow day and day
follow night,
>show me the path so my feet do not falter.<p>

Empower me with good, rid me of evil,
>so the oaths I have taken are never broken.
May Fate smile on me,
today and tomorrow,
>heed my thoughts and what my heart has spoken.<p>

To those whose time has come and gone,
>and to those whose time is looming near.
Let the gates of glory
stand eternally open,
>so those who remain needn't feel any fear. <p>

Glory to those who died in honour,
>Glory to the daughter and to the son,
May our hearts remembers
our vows,
>Lord of of the heavens, may we remain, as one.<p>

Amen."

D1NGO sputtered for a moment, lost for words, when she suddenly appeared in his sightline, and marched right past him and his cell. "Hey!"

She paused, ten paces too far past to face him squarely, and turned, slightly, to look at him past her shoulder. "They have endangered the Admiral, and now accuse him as heavily as they do me. This I cannot allow, D1NGO. Your words will not stay my feet." In her hands were the Ultra's energy blades, explaining how she had gotten loose when said individual had not had any key. "Something must be done before this madness consumes us all."

D1NGO saw the determination, the resolve, in her eyes, and knew she was right about one thing at the least- there was nothing going to

stop her. Not this time, but he found he was unsurprised. Her reverence for the Admiral was a faith no accusation could shake. He inclined his head, in agreement, acceptance, of her declaration.

"Then I am coming with you. You cannot take on the whole of the Mirratord alone, Aardvark, as has been proven. Not even as one of us."

She appeared to give this consideration, before spanning the gap between them and slicing free the bars that held D1NGO in. They rattled and rang like bells against the stone floor, but there was no one left to hear it save those who had made it happen. D1NGO stepped out into the hall, and accepted one of the single-blade swords from Aardvark's grasp when she offered it before both turned from the place and lit out across the old city ruin to the heart of the cancer that was eating the Mirratord from the inside.

Scene Nineteen

Wildfire pressed to his hooves, wearily but curious enough to press on anyway. It seemed a kind of colored chaos was consuming the echelons of the Mirratord, and the distrustful madness could see no end of the exponential expansion throughout the ranks. Even the newest members seemed wary of trusting their fellows with so much as their names. It was disheartening, and alarming, to say the least.

Slightly imbalanced, Wildfire walked across the medical chamber to where the Admiral lay, much of his skin brackish although the burns didn't appear to be deeper than that. He was alive- he was breathing- but there was no sign of coherent consciousness about him.

Investigating something he had thought he'd seen from across the room, Wildfire lifted Aozora's left hand, and turned it palm-up to see the burned tattoo in his skin there. He studied it for a moment, then lifted a leg to look down at his own shin. Looking back at the Admiral's palm, Wildfire shook his head. No, the Admiral had not been alone. He'd been hanging onto someone else by the leg, possibly to keep them from getting away, when all hell broke loose, and the heat involved in that hell had scarred an imprint of the Mirratord's style of greave into his palm.

He looked up, when another of the investigating Council members entered, with a posse of following Mirratord officers. He looked as if he were going to commit to something he really didn't like, but the fact that he was angled straight for Wildfire's and Aozora's position made him wonder if there wasn't about to be an execution. He retained his place between the newcomers and the Admiral, though, well aware what that might buy him.

"Stand aside, Wildfire." The Councillor ordered.

"No sir."

"Are you aware you are protecting the source of this chaos we are experiencing?"

"I am aware that I am not in fact doing any such thing, but standing in defense of my superior against false accusations."

"Where is the proof of these claims?"

Wildfire lifted Aozora's hand, and spread his fingers for the Councilor to see the imprint. "He wasn't alone at all in that chamber, Councilor, he was more likely in combat with the one who really is responsible for this chaos."

He received a skeptical glare, but the Councilor waved at his entourage to stand down. "Where would we find someone of such weal? The generator chambers have been vented and repairs are underwayâ€| there were no other bodies found."

"Considering it's just a narrow catwalk, Councilor, and he's not got a gauntlet shaped scar in his hand, I'd say look down." Wildfire mentioned. "Way, way down."

Scene Twenty

Acalade turned to see when the doors slammed open, and her mandibles parted in wordless surprise when she saw Aardvark storming through the place, taking a shortcut down to the medical chambers. D1NGO was on her flank, but he was neither escort nor chasing her down, making Acalade wonder what in creation was happening. Had they found the aggressor? Freed the innocent? This didn't appear to be the case even though she had little more than what she was seeing at current to base her hunch on.

Still, she said nothing as they went past her, well aware she neither wanted to accompany them nor did she want to be there when whatever action they were bent upon was carried out. Acalade shook her head, whispering into the open, empty silence. The soft whispers echoed back after the receding storm of footsteps, as a light hiss.

"May the gods guide your blade, sister, so you do not miss your target in your blindness."

Pain and anger swelled and flowed in her wake, Acalade knew, as she knew this case was more personal to Aardvark than it had been before Lone's disappearance. Acalade wondered if she weren't the only one that understood it was the Councilor whom the assassin-bard had been courting. His capture seemed unlikely, considering what he must have known, but it was truth, and had changed Aardvark's outlook on the spy from mere irritation to outright fury. She would find them, and when she caught them, she would cut them to ribbons for the injury.

Acalade could only wonder if she would stay that final, fatal cut long enough to figure out where Lone had been hidden.

Scene Twenty-one

D1NGO passed the doors right behind Aardvark, but he didn't see her turn right away and had to pause and look again when she suddenly vanished from before him. Bee-lining to the place where Tartan had been put from the last time she had handled him, she seized the officer once again and slammed him from his perch into the wall.

The only noise that escaped him was of startled surprise, even though he knew exactly what was about to happen all over again via the knowledge of whom had ahold of him. Pain was soon to follow, he

understood, as the female snarled in his face. "You tell me where he is or I'll cut your face right off your head and show it to you." She hissed.

Tartan clawed at her arms, choking on his constricted windpipe. He couldn't have spoken easily even if he'd been willing, but Aardvark was unsympathetic. A fist found his gut, forcing a gag as air he hadn't known was in him was blasted out.

"Speak! And tell me no lies lest I carve them into your hide!" That same fist snatched at her belt, and lifted, coming to rest at eyelevel with a sword clenched in it. Tartan's eyes widened when said tool flared to life, the faint, soft buzzing hum all the accursed noise he needed to get him started.

Gasping to inhale enough air to speak with, Tartan blabbered the first few syllables, incoherently, too frightened to manage them in a cohesive manner. She went to stab him with the sword, but D1NGO caught her arm, stopping her. "Easy there, Aardvark."

"Find me some truth serum!" She snapped, in response.

Tartan watched D1NGO leave her side in compliance with the request, wishing for all he was worth that he wouldn't go. Not and leave him all alone with the she-devil! The sword deactivated, though, and she punched him again. This time, harder. Inhaling hard enough to choke on the speed of the introduction of the air, Tartan gasped out his first intelligible sentence in haste. "I don't know what you're talking about-!" He started, but she hit him with another three blows, and for some reason he wasn't sure of, he tasted stomach acid in his mouth when she finished. Gagging, begging that she stop, he rasped, "Okay! Okay!"

Aardvark either didn't hear him or didn't believe him- she hit him again. "Where is he, you two-faced bastard!"

"I said I'd talk!" He wheezed, trying desperately to wrest free of her grip on his throat. "I said I'dâ€"

"Stop stalling!" She snarled, yanking him from the wall to slam him against it again. "I swear I'll rip you limb from limb with my bare hands if you've caused him harm."

Tartan's visage changed when D1NGO reappeared, holding a phial of truth serum. "Heâ€ but he's already dead, Iâ€ I didn't want to tell anyone because it would ruinâ€"

Aardvark's sword flashed at the bottom of his vision, for just a half a second. Tartan screamed in agony, the blade lit off with the business end pressed against him. Now there was a hole through his middle, and gods but it hurt! For a moment his mind buzzed indecipherably with the pain and the implications. He started to speak again, in defense, when he realized she hadn't taken his word at face value- hadn't she mentioned killing him, if Lone had been harmed? Even as much as they obstructed normal body function and introduced enough pain to cause his vision to fade out slightly, and his mind to spin, the injuries she was giving him wouldn't kill him unless they were left to lie as was for the next three days. That would be a slow, horrible death, and he'd feel every moment of it. This was not what he'd had in mind.

If she hadn't been holding on to him, he would have curled into a ball on the floor, but her grip was almost as strong as her arm, and his position didn't waver. Right as the waves of agony stopped coming, and the pain dominating his mind began to ebb enough for cohesive thought, she let go, allowing him to drop.

For the agitation of the injuries, newfound searing agony washed over him, and he spasmed, choking on his cries.

"You seem mighty assured he's the enemy, Aardvark." D1NG0 commented.

"He's damn heavyâ€|" She muttered, circling the wrist of the hand she'd held Tartan with with her other hand. Looking up at D1NG0's face, she let out a shaky sigh. "I caught him in the act of data duplication, D1NG0."

"What data?"

"The security grid- you know, the one we nolonger have?"

"What? How can you say that? It was fine just-." He started, until a third voice entered the converse from halfway across the room.

"She's right. The grid went down when the power bridges shorted. That's why the Admiral is in here now."

Aardvark looked past D1NG0, as he turned, and they both looked over at Wildfire.

"If I hadn't been here, if you hadn't come got me, if I hadn't seen that scarring on his hand, they would have executed him for the blame of the act." He added. "You were on the right track before, Aardvarkâ€| gods only know if you still are."

"So it is down, then?" D1NG0 asked, as Aardvark gave Tartan a kick that made him gasp.

"Yes- and they took Evilkitty away for questioning when she too tried to defend the Admiral's position."

"Thank you, Wildfire." Aardvark said, softly, her gaze not leaving the curled form on the floor at her hooves. "We all still have a long ways to go."

"Whâ€| whyâ€|" Tartan rasped, breathless, peering up at them. "You don'tâ€| no proofâ€| against meâ€| I have doneâ€| done nothingâ€| wrong."

Aardvark laughed, mirthlessly, at him. "I caught you in the act of subterfuge, good Tartan, and you try to claim innocence?"

"I saw the terminal." D1NG0 added. "You're just barely slick enough to have fooled us once. We aren't dumb enough to fall for the same tricks again."

"You don't know anything!" Tartan wailed. "I was doing nothing wrong! I don't know where Lone is, I don't know anything about him! I don't

even know why you've targeted _me_, and all I was doing was updating the backups!" He sobbed for the pain once, before sucking in a breath past his teeth and attempting a semblance of composure. "You only think you have your spy, you only think it's me."

"Then why have you spoken of what you already told me?" Aardvark asked.

"You wanted to hear it!" he snapped, beginning to build on his anger. It helped him handle the pain. "I said what I thought you wanted to hear, because I didn't want you to hurt me! I'm beyond caring what you do now, I just don't want to be a part of it anymore."

D1NG0 cast a speculative look at Aardvark, but she seemed unconvinced. "D1NG0, please apply the serum."

"I already told you the truth!!" Tartan protested, feebly fighting off the application. "I already told-!!"

"Then you won't mind saying it again." Aardvark answered, coldly.

"Noo!!" Tartan screamed, attempting to kick D1NG0 off of him. "I will not be dishonored this way! I will not be treated like a Houseless scallywag! Get away from me, you filthy rot!"

D1NG0 smacked him aside the head with a hard fist nearly as big as the targeted noggin. Stunned, Tartan stopped fighting for just long enough for the Strike Team member to apply the serum properly. Rising, he looked at the empty injector. "Here's hoping he doesn't die before this takes effect."

"Oh, he'll live." Aardvark mentioned, as if the topic of converse was the weather. D1NG0 looked at her, wondering just how cold she could be, to another's pain, when sometimes she was so acutely in tune with the empathy she owned that she literally felt the aches of others in her own nerve clusters. Wonder, indeed. "Long enough for his death to be by action of intent."

Below them, Tartan only groaned, bemoaning his woes.

Scene Twenty-two

Tejan55 took hold the lip of the catwalk and overhanded his way up a rail stem to the top of the railing, holding also to his load. The pulley came to a stop, and he leapt nimbly onto the walk, turning to pull the disfigured and broken carcass along with him. Slipping it loose of the cables it was tethered to, Tejan55 let it drop with a stiffened clang to the metal plating of the catwalk floor.

Rigor mortis had set in, and it was still a fresh enough body that despite having cooled, it was also still fairly stiff. Bodies older than three days tended to be as limp as ones fresh enough to still be warm. The morbidity of the image was hard to stomach, though, even for Tejan55, who wasn't normally susceptible to such moments of weakness. The look on the Councilor's face, though, was something shy of green.

"What a mess."

"Looks like he had the same problem the Admiral did- and there's glove fibers on one of his greaves- see the black handprint?" Tejan pointed. "But he broke every bone in his body for the fall."

"At least we found it before it began to decay." Lai mentioned, lifting his gaze to settle it on Tejan55. He, at least, wasn't stuck in a kind of fatal repose. "Do you recognize him?"

"Sure- spoke to him time or two." Tejan was still looking down at the body. Lai briefly wondered if he even owned a stomach. "That's Snake, there."

"Snake?" Lai asked.

"Yes sir, one Lord Snakie alias Snake, member for about a year, tops. He was rather renowned for his technical and programming capabilities, but it seems he fell afoul of the wrong personâ€|"

"Wrong person?"

"Well, yeahâ€| you know, the Admiral? Even I wouldn't want to fight that guy, on his bad day and my good one. Snake hereâ€| he got what was coming to him. If you don't mind my saying, Councillor, you couldn't fight that guy without getting hurt pretty good."

"I see." Was all Lai Tasha would commit to. "I will relay this development to the rest of the Council. See that the body is properly processed." He turned from the scene, and paced away, as Tejan55 looked on.

When the Council member was out of earshot, Tejan55 looked over the railing, down at the trio of other Minors scraping bits of Snakie's electrified corpse from the buffer zone's floor plating. He sighed. "This bodes a bit ill for us what care."

Scene Twenty-three

Aozora began to feel the soft beckon of consciousness after the dazed dream-state faded. This call began to morph into a kind of pained wailing, screaming at him, begging that he return to the world of the living. It seemed there really wasn't much of an option, as he came to realize his tormented summons was the beckon of his beaten, tortured body. Physical pain assaulted his mind, and he jerked awake almost all at once.

Silence boomed around him, as he pried his eyes open. He tried to see what was happening around him as a brief history of his situation reeled past in his forebrain. For what it was worth, he wondered why he was where he was now. At first it seemed alien, a strange place indeed, until he saw a medical officer and recognized the fellow.

This would be the medical chambers, then, andâ€| where was Snake? Had he, too, survived that impossible maelstrom of freed electricity? He still remembered seeing the arc snapping over his shoulder, as big as his thigh and trailing smaller crawling lines across his armor as it stained a bioluminescent image in his vision. It had been brighter than white, too bright to own any discernable color. And it had hurt, hurt like hellfires.

Weakly Aozora pulled on the muscles in his neck, trying to turn his head, but his muscles still felt bubbly and spongy, some of them like jelly, others taut as harp strings. Everything he owned hurt, as well as some things he couldn't readily identify. There was a light hum over to the left, and he heard someone open the door. They weren't automated contraptions here, but hinged panels within the frames that held them. There wasn't the spare power for everything to be automated, as well as much of the city ruin being incapable of tolerating a hollowed wall for such a door to slide into. It was easier just to use what there already was, and mind that one wasn't left hanging open for someone else to walk into.

Aozora spent a moment trying to sort his scattered thoughts, at times unable to complete a single thought as he thought it. Foreign residual electricity was still present, and on occasion a synapse would fire what ought not to have, so he wound up tolerating a couple of twitching motions he didn't remember asking the muscles in question to make. Eventually he did get his head to turn, though, and despite having vision that was bleary at best, he managed to squint past the lights and see a more or less clear enough image that was recognizable.

Waitâ€| wasn't that Aardvark?? How, why, was she outside the detention cell? And D1NGO! Right there, with herâ€| they were leaving, had someone else by the collar, were dragging him out of the room. Dragging him like he was heading for somewhere he had no willingness to enter. He fought them, but his motions seemed feeble, as if previously weakened or wounded.

Briefly Aozora thought to wonder why, but he never finished the thought.

Scene Twenty-four

Tartan 118 appeared either immunized against or deliberately acting against the serum, but either way he was doing nothing but babbling incoherently, sputtering nonsense, as though completely unaware of his surroundings. Aardvark thrust his battered form into a bare steel chair, and tied him to it. His head rolled to one side, as he mumbled something she was sure weren't words. Not real ones, anyway.

D1NGO stood by the door, watching for the most part, wondering why she seemed so very intent that the information she sought be obtained, and in a timely manner. Secured to the chair, she took a step back and jack-slapped Tartan hard enough to slam his head against the bones in his neck, as they wouldn't turn any farther. The jolt brought him around, but the first thing out of his mouth was more towards the sudden intense neckache he was feeling. When the sentiment was properly shared with any listening, he opened his squint slightly to peer at the female standing over him.

"Have anything of use to say to me, Tartan?" Aardvark asked.

"Not to you, no."

"Fine." She lifted a plain metal blade that had a patch of rust near the hilt on it and tapped the flat of the blade against the side of Tartan's head. "Lets' get started, then."

"You've already killed me, you arrogant scallywag." He snapped, irritable. "What else can you possibly ask of me?"

"You took my love from me, and I'm going to make you give him back." She answered, simply. "I want Lone. You have him, you have the knowledge of where he is somewhere in that ugly head of yours, and you're going to share it with me!" long before you die, because you know what?"

D1NGO cringed at the implication.

"I'm going to kill you, Tartan, but I'm going to let Lone decide how." Her musical voice was sweet on the surface but dripping acid all over Tartan's ears. "You scream good for him, Tartan, because even if you defy me to the very end, I'm going to destroy you, and break your little mind in half."

"You couldn't make a child tell you a known fact." Tartan spat, defiant. "You're pathetic."

"Mayhap that I am, but not nearly so as you are." She twirled the knife once and plunged it into his thigh, all the way to the hilt, and then twisted it sideways.

D1NGO grimaced, but he didn't say anything as Tartan screamed through his clenched mandibles. It was a muffled cry, at best, but his pinched face was beyond expression. The tendons in his neck all bulged weirdly out for the tension he was putting on them, but after the initial outburst all he did was hiss heavy breaths quickly between his teeth. She worked his nerves in every way imaginable, even in ways D1NGO had not known of prior. It wouldn't have taken as much to pry a word or two from himself, he was sure, had he been the one under that female's touch. Gods but she was cruel. Everything she did to him hurt, and even a few things she didn't hurt too.

Tartan only screamed for the worst few, as if reserving a limited supply. Sometimes he would growl, or just hiss. He fought the binding that held him firmly to the chair, with as much as he could muster, even when she wasn't laying into his hide. Increasingly, it became more and more shredded looking, until it seemed he owned no intact shred of skin left. Aardvark didn't pause her work, aware if he was going to speak he would make motions towards that end. To D1NGO, it became a pattern- and he recognized it. She wasn't actually attending the matter at all, but treating her victim as an inanimate object with which to experiment with a new knife upon. He realized also that if she were to so recognize that each incised and lacerated part was attached to a whole, a living, breathing sentient, she likely wouldn't be able to finish.

Her determination to retrieve The Lone Heretic from his mystery prison forestalled her step back to view the big picture, though, and she sawed and sliced, pulling, pinching, sometimes hitting, the raw and bleeding Sangheili.

D1NGO never left his place by the door, well aware what end might meet him if he were to so much as mention interfering. Tartan, it seemed, either had nothing to spill, or had anticipated this. Either way, he wasn't talking. Not a word.

Scene Twenty-five

Soulguard looked up when Lai entered the room, startled slightly from his almost-reverie. "What happened?" He asked, sensing the other Councilor's distress and unease.

"The more time goes by the less I understand about this situation- but the only member of the Strike Team in detention is Evilkitty."

"What? When?" Soul asked.

"As of this morning, both Aardvark and D1NGO are missing, and Acalade, while under observation for her relations with the former, admits to knowing nothing. Only that her sister is alive and in no current physical danger."

"How useful." Soul muttered, grumpily. "And the Admiral has been seen to, I suppose?"

"Noâ€| Wildfire stopped us short, and sent us elsewhere to dig up more confusing data." Lai admitted. "He's still alive, as it were, if one could call his condition that."

"He's only been burned, Lai, not cremated." Soul reminded. "So as far as we know, as things stand we have only the one kill- by Aardvark in the Archives?"

"No, there's another body, this one in similar condition as the Admiral. Apparently he was present when said individual was hit with some high voltage."

Soulguard pondered that. "Who would this be?"

"A lesser ranking officerâ€| I hadn't seen him much around of late, but he did spend a lot of his time at the mechanical end of this machine we have builtâ€| a 'Lord Snakie'."

Soul shook his head. "Three's charm, my friend."

"We have only one left, Soul, before that charm strikesâ€| and good, bad or indifferent, Aardvark is loose, and so is D1NGO."

"You speak as though the female is the more important, the more dangerous of the two."

"She is! I once favored her talents for that same danger she carries that she has apparently turned against us now. Recommended her for recognition to the rest of the Council for all her accomplishments. That female could go on and on with accolades to make the mightiest stiffen with envy. She doesn't, and often gets agitated when someone else does it for her, thoughâ€| she likes to be quiet. In the back, unrecognized, secret."

"I know." Soul said, soothingly. "I worked with her a lot in the histories section in the Archives, after all."

"So tell me, brother." Lai sighed, wearily. "How have we come to this- that the Mirratord might fall into itself in utter collapse? We cannot contain even our own, how can we hope to fight the rest of the universe?"

Soulguard only shrugged. "We will sort this problem out soon enoughâ€| how is the investigation into the disappearance of Lone coming?"

"Iâ€| haven't heard."

Soul gave him an interested look. "You've fallen out of the loop chasing a ghost?"

"This spy is not a ghost! He is quite real, he or she or whatever it is, and he is causing us all a great deal of heartburn!" Lai snapped.

"Calm yourself, Lai. Remember who you're talking to isn't the spy."

Lai heaved a sigh. "Ugh."

"So progress on the spy investigation is more or less a circular endeavor?" Soul asked. "You appear to be growing nothing if not more and more irritated that you think you are being led to chase your own shadow."

"Yes, something of the sort." Lai answered, breathing a tired, frustrated sigh. "I do not know where to look, or even whom to look at."

Soulguard gave that some thought. "I am unsure how to advise you on this. It seems a bitâ€| premeditated."

"I've gotten that impression also. Which is why everyone is so on edge now that that cruiser is in the system, waiting for that final tattle-tale signal."

"Has anything been sent out?"

"No, thankfully, at least not yet, but it isn't leaving. We may have to call in some of our own in case it doesn't leave, and blow it out of the sky."

"Or you could just ask Acalade to summon them away."

"Summon how?"

"I've seen her do it before- remarkably, herself and her sister too. But I don't know how, they justâ€| look at you for a moment and suddenly you think you're needed urgently elsewhere."

"Mind tricksâ€| that they're using against us now, I might point out."

"Not so much. Have any more casualties happened between now and the time Aardvark was loosed?"

"Not that I have heard, but then she may not have caught anyone yet."

"Some of our number are all too easily caught up with, Lai, do try to remember what it is you are dealing with. Aardvark is remarkable,

yes, but she is only mortal in the end, and therefore susceptible to the same things. Frustration not the least among these."

"Are you defending her??"

Soul shook his head. "She's looking for the same spy you think she is. Were I her, isolated from all allies, exiled from a home field advantage and pinned with the same accusation I sought to bring onto the real guilty partyâ€| I would become rather irate rather quickly as well."

"And murder your own?"

"I'm not defending her actions, Lai, stop acting as though I am. I'm merely sayingâ€| Aozora did say he had someone on the case, and while the rest of us were still looking at each other she was out there tracking down suspect people." Soul gestured loosely. "All I'm saying is maybe we should let her at least try to do her jobâ€| maybe she'll catch whoever this spy is, given enough time."

"In the meantime she could massacre much of the lesser officers before we had a chance to bring her down."

"And what if you're wrong this time, o logic-minded Lai? What if your blinded focus has you pointed at the wrong target?"

Lai Tasha studied him for a long while, in silent contemplation of his words. Finally, he answered. "If it is not I that is wrongâ€|"

"I take responsibility for my words, Lai, fear not of me. I know fully what I am proposing." Soulguard nodded to him. "And I shan't back away from whatever fate awaits me."

Scene Twenty-six

Silence at first, and thenâ€|

"Whatever in the world??"

More silence. Thunder of unknown origins boomed in his ears, but he knew it was just compensation for the utter lack of noise, even soft whispers of air in motion or distant footsteps, on the part of the drums in his ears. Oh how they could be loud, all by themselves.

Again, "What is that?"

The voice was familiar, but he hadn't opened his eyes in a full hour, and so couldn't confirm or deny any of his whirling thoughts. More of them managed completion before he lost them, now, as the bio-static charge his body owned decreased. Blessedly, that annoying twitch had gone as well. Aozora tried to peel open an eye, but it had glued shut somehow and took more than the muscles on his face to open. Only trembling slightly, he raised an arm, and ran that hand over his face. Weirdâ€| he didn't remember his palm feeling like printed leather.

"Oh, I see." The speaker added. "Where did you find it? Youâ€| oh? What does it do, then?" A rather lengthy pause. "Alright, can you

demonstrate? Like, on something small, insignificant?"

Something hissed shortly, disrupting the profound thunder for a moment, and he realized he could hear it so acutely it was as if the maker of the noise were right outside his ear. Directly, there came a relatively small, doubtless harmless for all the size and potency it held, but active nonetheless, faint electric pop. His eyes shot open wide, and he traced his focus over the length of the room, searching for the source of that noise and begging that it not be near him.

"Hey, that's neat. You don'tâ€| yeah? Wow. But what is it really for, though?"

He discovered Wildfire, across the room, talking to someone he couldn't recognize from behind. Right as he did so, though, said Strike Team member spotted him, too, and looked back.

"Admiral! You're awake." Hobbling, almost, as if having escaped being crippled by inches at some point, Wildfire spanned the distance between them, dismissing his company out of hand in favor of the new. Stopping at Aozora's side, Wildfire settled against another bed. "How do you feel?"

"A littleâ€|" His voice sounded strange to him, but he supposed it might be a combination of being hoarse and having a completely dried mouth. "â€| crispy."

Wildfire smiled at him. "I can imagine- that's how you look, sir. Would you like a full report or the short and nasty version?"

Aozora paused for thought, then asked, "Which do we have the time for?"

Scene Twenty-seven

Tartan 118 sat unmolested, the blood he'd shed long since coagulated, dried into crusty sheets of almost armor-like plates of huge, solid scabs. Fluids wept from the corners of the ones he had broken by flexing, but though it hurt a little, the agony of torture was overwith. Aardvark had quit peeling him apart a little over an hour ago, and had sat back, her arms crossed, on the table where the tools for the task were usually kept. One hoof she had tipped onto the point where the cleft began.

She'd been watching him in complete silence the whole time, either in contemplation of some other way to make his life miserable or in puzzlement at her complete and utter failure thus far. Tartan still wasn't sure what drove her, but one thing he knew almost instinctually, was that she was far from done.

D1NGO didn't question, didn't protest, didn't even shift his weight. Tartan had tried to stare him down, but he seemed to be wasting his efforts on a genuine statue of stone. For all that he responded to the events before him, though, D1NGO was quite acutely aware of what was happening, and even part of why.

Tartan looked back at Aardvark, and breathed a weary sigh. There was little he could say in his defense now, not when he'd resisted for this long against the top echelons' art of persuasion. He'd been

prepared for just such a thing as this, but when it came right down to it the very fact that he was still fighting the interrogation was a tell in and of itself. It was simple logic, really- the Mirratord hadn't trained him for this, so the enemy of the Mirratord must have.

But then came the rest of the problem. His backup was missing. Where was his rescue? He hadn't expected this session to last as long as it had, let alone for longer yet. Finally, Aardvark rose, standing on her own hooves, and drew nearer to where he was tied. Despite himself, he flinched away, in no way having enjoyed being beaten and carved upon like a side of beef.

She lifted a leg, and planted that hoof between his knees, before leaning both her elbows on her own. Leaning over closer to him, she cocked her head. "Not a word?" The query wasn't coarse. If she wasn't actively furious, Tartan had discovered, she rarely spat or barked at anyone. Her anger came through as a kind of dangerous calm up to a point. Usually, that tipping point was where the anger manifested as murderous rage.

But by then, if the signs had been ignored, the target deserved his fate. Tartan inhaled, slowly, blinking at her. He wondered how such a pretty female came to be so callous. She could sing, she could dance, she could turn heads. But she could also sever them, and that was the part of her he knew he was seeing now. Her calm, almost sympathetic expression was misleading, at best.

"Hmm." She tipped her head the other way, before straightening, and lifting her hoof from the seat of the chair he was in, and placing it next to her other, on the floor. Her arms recrossed. "D1NG0, do we know where the port jack clamps are?"

"Uhâ€|" He sputtered, wracking his brains for even the existence of such a device. "â€|no."

"Ah, wellâ€| we can do this the hard way." She glanced over her shoulder, running her eyes across the row of torture tools. Few had been in this room. The questioning chamber where members were taken in the routine sweep of the ranks was elsewhere, and less brutal. Seeing Tartan shift out of the corner of her eye, and turned her head back to see him squarely again. "Did you want to say something?"

"No." He answered, shaking his head. "No, I'm not going to tell you anything."

She held up her hands, and looked at them. Then at him. "You're sure?"

"Yesâ€| why?" He asked, eyeing her odd posture.

"Because here is where I get tired of ripping bits from your physical." She answered. "Here is where I begin to gnaw upon your conscious mind, and grind the part of you that defines who you are into a whisper of what it once was."

"What?" Tartan asked, puzzled.

"This is the part where you show me what I want to see, because I

know it's in there, and then you collapse into a babbling heap of incoherent madness, bereft of the core of your mind." She raised her hands, as if holding a large sphere of the air. "I'm going to tear your mind right out of your head, and I'm going to dissect it until I find what I'm looking for."

"And then?"

"Then? Then? Dear Tartan, there is no and then. You'll be little more than a vegetable."

"Then how will you justify killing me for all that treachery you claim I am guilty of?"

"There is no purpose in preserving a vegetable, Tartan, there'd likely be no argument for keeping you alive after this. Your punishment will come in the form of a slow, horrible disjunction of the fabric of your consciousness. You can't ask for worse."

Tartan leaned his head back when she extended her hands, so she paused. "No? You want to tell me, then?"

"I don't know what that is or what you think that is, but I do know that since you have something to do with it, I don't want it on my head." Tartan answered.

Aardvark just laughed, but it was an evil, awful laugh, something he was sure she ought not have been capable of, not with those same vocals she used to sing so prettily with. D1NGO, very much interested in what the sphere of invisible, empty air was for, leaned forward slightly to try and see if a different angle would help his inability to see what it was she was holding. It didn't.

Still, he didn't ask outright, aware such a technical query at this point might harm her thrall that she had somehow garnered over her victim.

For a moment, she appeared to consider setting the invisible ball aside for now, but in the end she stepped forward anyway and dropped it right over Tartan's head. Despite how he was sure he hadn't felt anything happen when she did that, he yelped in protest, wrenching his head to one side in a futile attempt to make her miss. Aardvark pressed a fingertip to her ear, and cocked her head to one side, staring at him.

Her next words froze his motions and broadened the width of his eyes.

"You're expecting someone."

D1NGO paused his own thought train, then, and looked at her. Was all that empty gesturing she'd just done for real? Amazed, D1NGO found himself listening more intently, and giving Tartan's head a stare that would have made an insect squirm. Tartan, for his own self, was still trying to see what it was that was supposedly sitting on his head, at a guess being more or less sphere shaped. For all his efforts, he couldn't see it, but it was oddly effective- which meant he was about to figure out what Aardvark meant by all that really descriptive monologue.

That turned out to be a frightening prospect, as his thoughts reeled in an attempt to scrounge something from memory to stop her. He realized it could easily be her making them reel, though, and tried to calm himself down and clear his mind of all thought. He focused on her face, for a moment, and a new respect seized his spine as a brand new kind of fear found his features. Seeing him looking at her, she simply gave him a half a distracted-looking smile, without a word.

Finally, Tartan shook his head vigorously. "Enough!! Alright, I'll tell you!" He shouted. "Just get out of my head!!"

Aardvark reached over, and made a thwacking motion about an inch from his face, her claw stopping short abruptly at the same time as something made a sharp _thunk_ noise. "Little late to start begging, Tartan."

Sweating now, Tartan jerked his head to one side, throwing it around for all he was worth in an attempt to loose whatever it was she'd put on him. "Get out! Get out! Get out! I swear I'll convince myself of a million lies before I let you turn my mind inside out!"

"Do you promise to be honest with me? I can always start over, you know." Aardvark answered. "It doesn't take any time at all to make the interface."

"I'll tell you!" Tartan howled. "Just get out of my head!"

D1NGO smiled, barely able to contain his laughter.

"Alright, then." Aardvark reached over, and when Tartan had stilled, she made as though to lift the sphere from his head, and promptly proceeded to fold it up into a palm-sized square, which she secured somehow to her belt. That done, she took something from her ear, and put the two together. This done, she looked back at Tartan 118.

"Start talking."

Scene Twenty-eight

It was almost dusk when Evilkitty slowed her spinning mind, and tasted her mouth. She'd left it open, for some reason, and now it was dry as a dead leaf. It tasted bad now, but she found her position on the floor not so disconcerting when she realized all the mortar was missing from the stones in a circular pattern right beneath her. Spitting to try and salivate as she did so, Evilkitty stuck a thumb as far into the crack nearest her as it would go, and pried up. The cobblestone moved, but proved heavier than she could lift with one digit from one hand. Raising her head, she pressed off the floor into a seated pose, then pressed her claws into the fitting, lifting the stone from its place.

Setting it aside, Evilkitty peered down curiously at the metal sheet underneath. Aside from a thin layer of dust, the metal looked new, not even harboring enough scuffing to have tolerated the stones being atop it for all that long. Curiosity piqued completely now, Evilkitty proceeded to lift away all the stones that were free, stacking them to one side in piles of three deep. After she'd finished, there lay exposed a big metal trapdoor, but it was not even remotely Forerunner-looking. This was not only newer than her own birth-date, but it was an alloy she actually recognized- no easy feat considering

she had never studied metallurgy. This was a Covenant metal, crate material. It was approximately weapons-grade one, the thinnest, weakest weapons-grade. Ten was ship's hull.

Finding the latch was neither automated nor electronic, she took the bars in hand and turned them, then used them to lift the door up from it's cradle. What she found beneath it shocked her more than finding it in the first place.

A blue-white energy-field barred the entryway, but the battery and control was on her side of the field. Reaching for it, her thumb found the activation switch rather by accident, and the field snapped off as she drew the device out of the hole under the door. Evilkitty spared it a brief look before looking down past where it had been. With the field out of the way, she could see all the way to the bottom of the hole. And there at the bottom was what she was sure was a body. Since it neither stank inside nor did the form look terribly decayed, she assumed they were recent as well- maybe a couple of days.

"Hello?" She called. The reaction was motion on the part of the figure. Before she had opportunity to call further or move much, this motion was followed up by another, swift action that saw the person all the way up to her. He spun from the top of the hole, and a hoof slammed into her gut, piling her against the rocks she had moved and winding her simultaneously.

Gagging more in surprise at the sudden attack, Evilkitty only had enough time to block the next onslaught as she was followed. "You should have known better than to open that door!" He snarled, seizing her by the throat and slinging her overhanded into the wall beside them. Evilkitty planted her hooves and thrust, knocking him over backwards and freeing her from his grasp. She had only made it to her knees when he reappeared on top of her, all fury and muscle.

Evkilky screamed wordlessly at him, raking claws across his unprotected face, causing him to recoil just enough so she could rise the rest of the way before he hit her with a huge, ball-o-rocks fist. Evilkitty couldn't take that kind of pounds per square inch pressure, and flew back several feet before slamming her head and shoulders on that wall too. Shaking it off, she managed to counter the next few attacks before rounding a leg over his shoulder and spinning them both to the floor of her cell with her full bodyweight.

Sitting on his neck, she stuck a thumb on his throat, threatening to puncture his veins if he so much as attempted to move her. Finally, the fight ended. His eyes narrowed, as he frowned at her, but she was still rasping from being winded so many times over.

"You're not him." Her companion mentioned. "Who are you?"

"Damn straight I'm not a him, you inobservant moron!" Evilkitty snapped, between wheezing gasps. "What were you trying to do, kill me? I got you out of there! And this is my thanks- I ought to throw you back again!"

"Why are you here?" He asked. "Did Tartan send you?"

"Who? Oh, that lunkhead. You mean the same Tartan Aardvark almost

murdered, looking for the spy?"

"She was closer than she knew." He said, quietly. "Where is she now?"

"Three cells down, on the other side of the corridor. Her, D1NGO and myself are all implicated for the same position as the Mirratord's first mole."

"I don't think I have ever seen you before."

"You've seen me. We spoke in the Archives, remember? What were you doing under my cell?"

"You may want to close that door before we get too deeply into discussionâ€|" He began.

"Answer me before I rip you a new one and let you spill it all over the stones!!" Evilkitty snapped, irate.

"Look, there's only two minutes left on the-." He didn't get to finish, as the entire floor of the cell heaved in a dome upwards, and fire blasted from the hatch in the floor, flooding the cell and part of the hallway before it all settled. Pieces of the ceiling collapsed onto them, amid smaller rubble, and the filled-in hole was now the epicenter of a bowl-shaped floor.

Evilkitty coughed at the dust in the air, and shoved her way off her companion, shouldering the detritus off her armor without comment. Had she not been atop him, though, her companion would not have fared so well. As it were, he was unhurt, though coughing like her for all the dust in the air. "You've proven a real crimp in my day, buster. You get out of my cell right this instant." Evilkitty pointed at the barred front.

He turned his head, and looked that way, from the floor, before rolling to his hooves, and slapping much of the dust from his robes. He looked back at Evilkitty. "It's locked shut."

"I don't care!" She shouted. "Out!"

"I'm not made of rubber, lady!" He snapped back, stepping up to her and towering over her. He had enough muscle to compete with the most strapping of the males she worked with, but she didn't back down a single step.

"Until such time as my position is formally revoked, I am still a member of the Mirratord's Strike Team- so you find a way, or so help me I'll dig that hole back out to drop you back into it and I'll slam that door shut so hard you'll never get it open!"

"Until such time as changes, I am going to be a member of the High Council up to the drawing of my last breath!!" He shot back. "I do not want nor do I need to compare wit or word with you, and I certainly do not need to have this discussion here now! You open that damned cell door for me, if you want me out so badly, or such time as you mentioned will come to pass with your own dying breath for insubordination!!"

Evilkitty backed up, then, her expression changing. "You're the

missing Councilor?"

"It's my understanding." His tone and expression didn't change.

"We've been looking for you for a good little while now. How'd you get down in that hole? And why'd it just blow up?"

"Tartan didn't want me to get too many ideas. He also didn't want anyone else getting too many, either. I didn't know he was working for someone outside the Mirratord, and he used that element to knock me senseless while I wasn't looking. Where is he, anyway?"

"I don't know- medical? Aardvark tore him a real new one."

"Good for her." He began to scrutinize the unsettled structure of the cell.

"You seem to think you know her a little better than you're letting on!" Evilkitty mentioned. "Am I looking at the mystery?"

He turned his head to look back at her, a mischievous grin on his features. "That's classified."

Scene Twenty-nine

Imperial Admiral Aozora wasn't sure if someone was dying or if they had just been stuck by a sword somewhere dark and concealed. But as the sound of the scream drew out, he realized it held no real physical recognition in it at all. That was the sound of someone in shock or denial at a sudden loss of emotional investment.

Another sound, that of laughing, echoed past him, drawing him nearer to the noise. A short, sharp roar later, something hard and metallic crashed to the stones in many pieces. Aozora rounded the corner and shoved the door open in time to see D1NGO turn and look at him, a blazing sword in one hand, Aardvark curled on her knees in front of him, sobbing.

At first he thought D1NGO had just sliced Aardvark open, but even as he deactivated the sword, and clipped it to his otherwise empty belt- he didn't even have a second sword on him- Aozora stepped close enough to see the real target and understand at least part of the scene. D1NGO let him pass them, Warbirds and Wildfire flanking the exit as the Admiral scrutinized the mess, kneeling in front of Aardvark to try to convince her to calm and straighten. For all his soothing, though, all she did was lean her head on him, unresponsive to his words.

Finally, Aozora looked back and down at the pair on the floor. He was about to ask what was going on, and why yet one more member of the Mirratord had been executed- by cranial removal- but D1NGO didn't let him speak first. "Lone has just been terminated, Admiral." He said, quietly.

Aozora's mind froze in its tracks. "He!" His voice sounded far away. "How do you know?"

D1NGO turned his eyes to the headless form in the mangled chair. Aozora's gaze followed his, then traced back again.

"Where was he being kept?"

"We don't know." D1NGO offered, his volume almost at that of a whisper. "But Tartan put an explosive with him, and it just detonated five minutes ago."

"Fiveâ€| someone said something about a seismic action somewhere elsewhere in the city on my way here, butâ€| oh, gods. Is she hurt?" Aozora said.

"Not physicallyâ€| but she's more of a mess than I've ever seen, sir." D1NGO answered.

Aardvark sniffed, inhaled deeply, and ran an arm over her face. Pushing from D1NGO's embrace, she pulled to her hooves, and turned to face Warbirds and Wildfire. For some reason, neither flinched but both watched her intently as she passed right between them, out the door and down the hall outside.

D1NGO heaved a sigh, looked at his hands, and stood up himself. Looking at Aozora, he afforded, "She was right, Admiral, she was right all along."

"About which part?" He asked.

"Him." D1NGO said. He waved a hand loosely at Tartan 118's body.

"She killed him too?" Aozora asked.

"No." D1NGO shook his head. "I did that."

"Should we follow her?" Warbirds asked. "This might not be over yet, sir."

"For now, Iâ€|" Aozora shook his head. "Get someone to clean up this mess." He said, before leaving. The other three followed, wordlessly. There was nothing left to say.

Scene Thirty

The corridor was empty. The amphitheatre felt hollow, the echo of the enormous chamber feeling more a farewell call than any amplification ideal for singing into. Still, at the very center of the circular room, Aardvark dropped to her knees, and bowed her head. Her very perception hurt, but even as she felt crippled, something told her she shouldn't be trusting someone who had been lying to them all for so long. The first words she spoke as she raised her head again had tune, broken as it were, the words of her song _A Whisper_ pouring forth like a river of her grief. "One whisper of a silent windâ€|" Her voice slowly lost the hoarse, broken tone, and her volume rose slightly from a hoarse whisper as she sang from her heart with her eyes closed, shutting out the world they perceived. "One blow of a casual zephyr, One beat of a dying heart, One kiss granted in farewellâ€|

One war a soldier to send

One life left to live by the letter

One chance at one new start

One last doom a blade to spell

Let us never be parted, let us remember

Where trust and devotions of monumental error

Hold to me and wait for a bright day

Perhaps if we try we can find another wayâ€|"

She let the sound flow around her, a refuge building around her. It was her solace, her one place of sanctuary none could steal from her. She opened her eyes when she heard the next stanza, the last of the chorus, singing without her.

"I know you see me

I can taste it in your tears

I know you hear me

I followed you all these yearsâ€|"

Slowly, through her tears, the form of her sister floated closer to where she sat on her heels. She looked up at Acalade's face, wondering why she was here, now. Resting on a knee before Aardvark, with the song echoing around them back again a hundred times, Acalade rested a hand on her sister's head. "He is looking for you, sister. Go to him before he thinks you are lost forever."

"I don't know where to look." Aardvark answered, weakly.

"For once follow your heart, Aardvark, and not your instincts. You will find him. He is near, and looking for you." Without more words, Acalade rose, and walked on past.

Aardvark shook her head, and rose from the floor, leaving the amphitheatre in a numb stupor as she fought to get her mind back online past the impossible news she had felt like a million knives. The sound of Tartan's laugh clung to her like tree sap, stubbornly refusing to leave her alone even long after his demise. In the end he had gotten what he wanted, won where she held most of the cards, despite it all.

She watched the walls go by, one by one, until there were no more to pass, and a broad open expanse was revealed past the last one. Through the garden plaza, and into a pavilion where the sun fell in stripes past the pillars, down through a stairway, across a juncture to a corridor lined with plasma sconces, and past that into another network juncture. Her head hurt, but she saw it all clearly, hunting by feel rather than by sound or smell or sight.

Taking a right, she passed a heavy door that had been left open since the place was found and retrofitted, through a small chamber beyond it and then the short archway beyond that, right into the entrance chamber for the detention cells.

Aardvark paused there, and looked around. Right as she was about to turn and follow a new path, a figure formed from the shadows between lights, moving towards her. She let herself stand there and watch, until the figure walked out into the light afforded by the circular skylight above them. Aardvark smiled, faintly, beginning to step forward again, slowly at first.

The newcomer paused, seeing her approaching, and waited until she had closed the remaining gap. He looked down at her, and she up at him, their gazes meeting and seeming to intertwine. In a kind of slow motion, she lined up, closed the last few inches, and wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his chest. Tucking his next to hers, he returned the embrace without comment.

There was no need for words. It was over, and they were finally free.

â€|Credits Rollâ€|

**Starring; **

_**THE STRIKE
TEAM**_

Aozora

Warbirds

Wildfire

Aardvark

Arxaon

D1NG0

Evilkitty

High Councillors

The Lone Heretic,

soulguard,

Lai Tasha

**Heretics**

Lord Snakie

Tartan 118

Honored Members

Maestro

maskofacalade

Noble Hunter

Sol 249

Tejan55

Fastrigger 117

Acetylcholine

**And special thanks to all those of the Mirratordâ€|**

When twilight falls across the plain

And darkness sets in again

Don't let it fill your heart this time

One day the stars will all align

No more anger, no more pain

No more standing in the rain

No more shadows, no more sorrow

No more crying for tomorrow

I will see you when it's all done

I will be there when it's all gone

I will greet you when you come

_Beyond the dawn _

Each day we all are brought to heel

Driven to question all we thought was real

Where war and disease taught us to kneel

And against assault our hearts to steel

No more anger, no more pain

No more standing in the rain

No more shadows, no more sorrow

No more crying for tomorrow

I will see you when it's all done

I will be there when it's all gone

I will greet you when you come

Beyond the dawn

Someday we will all stand together

Bound by an unbreakable tether

We will rise with the winds and soar far away

We will see what was lost again someday

No more anger, no more pain

No more standing in the rain

No more shadows, no more sorrow

No more crying for tomorrow

I will see you when it's all done

I will be there when it's all gone

I will greet you when you come

Beyond the dawn

Somewhere there is a place to belong

Where we stand together and we stand strong

But you haven't seen it, not on this day

I precede you there, now, going away

No more anger, no more pain

No more standing in the rain

No more shadows, no more sorrow

No more crying for tomorrow

I will see you when it's all done

I will be there when it's all gone

I will greet you when you come

Beyond the dawn

Don't forget me, I will remember you

Be what you are and keep your heart true

I will see you again when the conflict is done

We stand here together

Etched in stone forever

I will see you again at the death of the sun

When there is no more anger, no more pain

No more standing in the rain
No more shadows, no more sorrow
No more crying for tomorrow
I will see you when it's all done
I will be there when it's all gone
I will greet you when you come
Beyond the dawn
It's all over now
You can sleep now
Nothing left to hold onto
No task left here to do
I will see you
When it's all over
I will see you
When it's all gone
I will see you
Beyond the dawn
Beyond the dawn

End
file.